

JOHN  
THE  
FOOL

BY  
CHARLES  
TENNEY  
JACKSON

Vista Med Asaya.

Dilbariy

Selena mitra.





# JOHN THE FOOL







"I did not desire you to die"

# JOHN THE FOOL

*An American Romance*

*By*

CHARLES TENNEY JACKSON

Author of *The Day of Souls*, *My Brother's Keeper*  
*The Midlanders*, etc.

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“Make me over in the morning  
From the rag-bag of the world !  
Scraps of dream and duds of daring,  
Home-brought stuff from far sea-faring,  
Faded colors once so flaring,  
Shreds of banners long since furled !  
Hues of ash and glints of glory,  
From the rag-bag of the world !”

*From Songs of Vagabondia*



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# JOHN THE FOOL



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## CHAPTER I

### THE WOOD SAINT

**“*B*LOW, *San Anton*—é!”**

**I**t seemed an echo—high and clear—out of the flooded forest aisles. Then laughter, mocking our little captain’s cackle. Allesjandro turned with his hand on the mast of his red-sailed lugger; he grinned at us about the limp canvas and then resumed his trot along the gunwale, wiping the sweat from his grizzled brow.

Laughter it was, and mocking us again, as we sat in the *Good Child*, which lay in the slowly floating bloom of hyacinths, for across this purple garden the white shell beach of Isle Bonne seemed no nearer than an hour ago. The south coast sun was April-warm, and the gray forest wall invited with its shadows as we drifted in that morning calm.

*“Blow, San Anton—é!”*

And again the three of us in Allesjandro’s lugger

stared helplessly into the cypress jungle—where was she?

For of all places—as my young friend, Redfield, put it when he arose astride his suit-case in the stern of the *Good Child*—“of all places that one would expect to find a girl, and laughing at us, it’s the limit!”

Virgil Williams nodded to me, with patient delicacy, ignoring the other man, as he had done these four days now when their hatred deepened.

“I told you, Doctor Dick,” he put in gently. “That’s the girl, and that’s the island. It’s the last of the sweet lands and beyond it run the salt tides. The sweet land is what I’m fightin’ fo’—against the Gulf of Mexico, and a girl!” And the gaunt Texan, with the eyes of a dreamer, looked wistfully past the white shell beach to the wilderness: “Only, Doctor Dick, somehow, I cain’t explain all my problems to the land company.”

As a director of the Prairie Meadows Land and Development Company I straightway guessed as much. Even though I couldn’t see her, because my eyes were now aching with all the colors under that Louisiana sky. Allesjandro, dragging his running pole along his pink and blue and yellow boat; pink and blue and yellow it was under its red sail, and

the little Manilaman, mahogany-brown in a shirt of emerald, limned against the purple of the floating gardens, and where one sought the open water for relief, the pools merely caught up all that morning brilliance and flashed it back to you!

Could Clell Redfield or I—men of the house habit—“New York fel-los,” as the Texan gently styled us—look long into the recesses of Laure’s island?

The little lugger captain kept on his ceaseless trotting to pole us shoreward against the hyacinth drift; we would never make Isle Bonne’s cove, that was sure; and of a sudden Allesjandro stopped and bawled into the silence, for that wood echo was mocking us again:

“*Blow, San Anton—é! Blow San Ignacio! San Pancrasio! San Pietro! San Barrabo!*”

There were some strange saints in Allesjandro’s calendar. But—on my word—as her elfin laughter answered the *Good Child* lifted, heeled a bit as her red canvas filled; and the little skipper, with a crow of delight, was back at his tiller, kicking it over with the crotch of his toes while he let the sheet run. Somewhere over the flowered water had moved a breath, and softly, as if treasuring its strength, the lugger stole from pool to pool in the

opening channel. Allesjandro was forward when her bow grated on the shell beach; he was out and throwing a line about the one-plank wharf, and then, his hat off, he was bowing exuberantly—but not to his saints, I fear!

“Me—sometimes I burn a candle fo’ dat wind you send, Saint Laure!” he cried, and bowed again: “San Barrabo, I put him last fo’ Papa Prosper say not to his saints, I fear!

Then we saw—wide-eyed, silent, curious at us—Allesjandro’s wood saint. She was swinging her brown foot in the clear black water about the cypress spikes, and her gown was so of the hue of the moss-hung bark that if she had not stirred, I might not have discovered her. The shimmer of that sun-filled sea and sky was still dazzling us. She was looking with an assumption of a grand dame’s hauteur at Virgil Williams; and the Texan returned her gaze patiently. Then, without recognizing him, or us two strangers to Isle Bonne, she arose with careful dignity, picked her way to the one-plank wharf and went along it to the stairs of Papa Prosper’s gal-lerie and up them to the house on stilts above the low shell ridge.

Clell Redfield and I gaped after her as if she had been a nymph disengaged and arisen from the

gray of the ancient wood. Only that slender form, her black hair in one lustrous fall of loose braid down her back, the suggested profile and the slant of her scornful eye as she passed—well, the way she cut us was far too much of the world to leave us any illusion of Arcady. She didn't like us, that was it, without doubt.

The tall Texan man sighed: "It's *me*. Spoiled all her fun soon as she saw I'd come back to Isle Bonne! You see we're fightin' her fo' the land. Laure and the Gulf of Mexico, and a little old king o' Spain—the three of them is some hard combination."

"The king of Spain?" I said, and even Clell forgot his mordant grimness in the Texan's presence to listen: "and why the king of Spain?"

Virgil made his old patient gesture out to the wide hot prairies beyond the swamp isle. "He is the worst of all. Been dead a hundred and fifty years, but once he gave a grant of land to one of these Drouillots. Yes, seh—half a million arpents of land to some old pirate of a duke. And here, the last of 'em sits on it—the last of the sweet land, fo' most of it's gone under the Gulf of Mexico."

Then he looked up patiently again at the shutter-

ed house on its absurd stilts above the shell-margined swamp. Allesjandro had gone on and into its galleried recess; the murmur of conferring voices came to us with the drone of bees somewhere beyond. "And I offered 'em forty thousand dollehs once for their rights to Isle Bonne—which rights are just none, unless they find the original grants from the king o' Spain. Otherwise the French heirs in Bordeaux hold it, and it's the Bordeaux Drouillots our company bought the titles from. Forty thousand, and Laure wouldn't take it—she'd rather put faith in that little king o' Spain than she would in *me!*"

And his high, serene smile came again.

I knew the man's stuff; he had got twenty thousand dollars of my money into the Prairie Lands & Development Company just because once I heard him tell his story over a directors' table. Simple, without pretense, or evasion—I remembered the stillness among those uneasy, complaining financiers as they badgered him with questions, and he told of the six years of disaster; the sun, the mosquitoes, the loneliness, the gulf storms up from Cuba, the sea rushing inland smiting his dredges and canals, wiping out in a night all the crawling labor of a

complacently, for I was one of those sorry and fatuous directors of Virgil's.

He smiled engagingly but with restraint.

"Come, now," I demanded. "I'll ask Mary and find out. What's become of your first land seeker?"

"Took one look at his homestead, and then blowed his head off. I bought his stuff from the widda—that's how I got that baby buggy. I sto'ed it in that camp, Doctor Dick. Maybe—someday—they'll be real folks around here, and—some kids—and—well, just you wait—" his slow loving gesture came, his hand up and waving to the dazzling shift of clouds and light over the *isle flottantes*—the impassable trembling prairie of the south coast: "You wait, Doctor Dick. Some day—" and in his eyes his dream stood forth—his wilderness was a phantom land of long ago, and in its stead a smiling countryside of homes and playing children: he went on serenely. "Some day, Doctor Dick, that little fool baby buggy—well, I don't know just exactly what I will do with it, but th's been times the last years on this job when it was all that kept me fightin'—yes, seh—that little fool buggy with the pink side flaps settin' in that swamp shack, all so lonesome. I expaict the's been times when I

sneaked ove' to that shack and looked in and said: 'I'm cleaned out now, but I'm comin' back; I'm licked now, but I'm crawlin' up—and all fo' you! Yes, seh—fo' you—personal and specified.' "

And then he stood up on the shell beach rimming Isle Bonne's forest, slowly dying in the stealthy sea tides creeping in; and to that fantastic place of light, of color and of silence, he spoke with the fine drama of a man defying failure:

"You see it's me—personal and specified—fo' the sweet land, against the gulf, the girl and the king o' Spain!"

## CHAPTER II

### THE MAN'S SIZE JOB

YOU see the fellow had been bred on defeat. He had gone in the front door of the house of failure, in and out of all the rooms, and out the back yard and in again, abiding there his days. The sea lands and the short-grass country, the ranges and the mountains; he had mined, and ridden, and fought through irrigation schemes—and somehow, always other men had reaped and he had turned aside with sore hands, watching and biding his time again.

I don't know just when he came to the south coast country; I had met him first in Mary Mason's apartments, on Fifty-seventh Street; she had known him since, as a child, she rode his saddle in the Panhandle country. He had loved her, it seems, but she had come east and made good; and again the silent soldier of misfortune had stepped aside for another. But I shall have to go back a bit to tell how it was that I came south with these two

men, Williams and Clell Redfield, and the hate between them.

I had retired from our firm of manufacturing chemists, that year, and had planned the next with Crosby, who had been our chief bacteriologist, and had his bachelor apartments with me for twenty-two years, until the government lured him away and sent him to the Caucasus on the trail of an impossible bug to avenge the wrongs of another bug—a Department of Agriculture bug that was being exterminated by still another bug of alien and predatory instincts. The third parasite was too much for poor old Crosby, so after wandering about Arabia and South Russia for a year he met a girl from home, resigned and settled down in a villa at Nice. That was a blow to me—unless you have scraped the bottom of the same tobacco jar with a man for twenty-two years you won't understand; besides she was twenty years younger. Still Crosby had written, cabled, plead, and when he learned that I retired from the firm, demanded. The girl had granted him a dispensation of six weeks while we tramped the Alps, and Crosby said he still had the same pipe.

So, until this affair of Mary and Clell, whom I loved better than—well, I won't say Crosby, but his

meerschaum—I had planned a deal on that sojourn. The girl had written me that never, never would she insist that we retire of mornings until four, if the talk was good, which was more than Mrs. Meegs would allow in our old quarters. Mrs. Crosby really seemed possible; and recalling Crosby's former theory that there were only two kinds of women in the world—the round rolly ones and the long skinny ones—I was curious about her. After forty a man is either a fool or a physician; and Crosby was not a physician—he merely knew something about bugs and bacteria.

As I said, the affair began that night in Mary's apartments. Virgil was in the city, called to his annual conference with the directors of the land company, facing their losing faith, complaints that he had drawn them into the most daring of all the Gulf coast reclamation projects. I had met him once; Clell, never. But he knew what Mary had been to the Texan; that for twelve years Virgil had loved her, and that is a long time for a man to love a woman steadfastly, loyally, without recompense, without hope; to grow from boyhood with a passion, then, reverencing its uselessness, lay it away, simply, without resentment, when he knew she cared more for another.

I had just of late had my eyes really opened to it all. Clell's and Mary's affairs were an open book. For all the six years of their engagement, since they had both graduated, classmates at the university, not a week had passed of their eager busy lives that I had not been with them, listened to their hopes and fears, successes and discouragements.

It had been queer enough. They had plunged into the business world together at the foot of the ladder in the same huge utilities corporation; Clell Redfield with his electrical engineer's diploma in the drafting room of the Amalgamated Electric Company, and Mary Mason in the offices. They were equally poor, young, proud, buoyant—they would get on and marry when the time came, when Clell had become a branch manager for the concern, or had opened his own consulting engineer's offices.

And six years of their engagement had come and gone, and Clell was still a draftsman advanced to no more than twenty-five dollars a week; while Mary was now the confidential secretary to the general manager at five thousand a year! That was the tragedy—I had been sadly watching it now these two years; Clell's boyish enthusiasm dulling, the light going from his eyes, a sort of shamefacedness about him when he was with Mary and me

at out little theater sprees or up at her flat—the iron was entering his soul that he had failed—at twenty-five. The pity of it!

But I understood; one can of a fellow as proud and sensitive as Clell. Mary dumbly knew and had tried to conceal it from herself and from him. Only ten minutes before Virgil came this night, her lover cleared it for them both, turning to me, as I removed my overcoat, with a beseeching pathos:

“Doctor Dick, I’m tired of waiting. It isn’t right—even before this thing of Leila’s money, and Mary having to make good my shortage, it’s become intolerable. Waiting—always waiting. Good lord, I’ve tried—I’ve smashed away down there six years—and to-day there are ten thousand young fellows just out of college who are ready and fit to take my job. And Mary—well, I asked her to resign her position and marry me and take a chance—and she won’t!”

Mary’s gray eyes had sought mine, strangely touched.

“That isn’t quite it, Doctor Dick. I love Clell. You both know how much. And it’s been hard waiting—oh, so very hard! But now, when I—I seem really to have gone on a bit—and Clell, dear—Clell—”

Clell had winced; I nodded sympathetically. I was guessing much.

"We ought to have been married long ago," went on Mary.

"And I asked her to marry me now," Clell cried.

"On your salary, Clell?" I ventured.

"That's just it, Doctor Dick. Six years, and by this time we had planned that I'd have got ahead and Mary would have quit her place and we'd been married. And it's Mary who's gone to the top!"

"Quite so." I put in far too tranquilly for hotheaded Clell.

"Every cent I ever saved went for technical books —what does it get a fellow with this big combine?"

"Clell, dear," Mary had put in softly, "you've done splendidly. Only—"

"That's it—only you've done better. Mary, there's something wrong somewhere. College and special training for you women is a big mistake. Or else it's the time and the city. You're too—too modern—I ask you to marry me on my salary and you won't."

"No. And you know I love you, Clell." And Mary turned to me with a bright brave eagerness. "Doctor Dick, I just asked *him* to marry me! Now—at once—to-morrow—and we'd both keep on

working until—till Clell did get on and open his own consulting offices, and things were splendid!"

"My dear—" I began, not so tranquilly this time.

"Thing of that Doctor Dick!" Clell cried. "Mary and I—married—both of us working—she at five hundred a month and me—a hundred! Good lord, do you think a man could stand for that?"

"I told him it would only be for a year or so. And we could keep on right in my apartments, Doctor Dick—and live on *his* income—and save my money to open his business with when the time came."

"Exactly like you, Mary. Wonderfully sane, practical—all that—but a man—" I looked pityingly at Clell, and it stung afresh, I fear.

"Doctor Dick sees—" he blurted.

"Dear old Dick is as out-of-the-century as you are." Mary retorted. "Oh, I want to help—and I want to be free—free—to help!"

"Er—but marriage—" I said, and the girl cut me off sharply.

"Marriage—is what?"

"Well—" I cleared my throat severely. "All these ideas of you intensely modern young women—er, break up the home and everything."

Mary laughed—there at the outraged two of us.

"To be free—and capable, and able to help make a home—that breaks up the home, does it?"

"What sort of home would that be?" Clell retorted. "I'll admit I'm a bit old-fashioned. And Mary, she's grown away from us, Doctor. The crowd that gathers here at her place Friday evenings—I can't go them. And the talk. It would discourage you, Doctor Dick, also."

"Clell, what do you think I've been working and waiting for all these years, except a home—a free home—the best home—the home of the women of to-morrow! A helpmate to the man I love—a companion. Of course I can't keep house on twenty-five a week. But I can earn money to do so on a hundred!"

Clell turned away from her victoriousness with a despair that I knew was irrevocable.

"To help you, dear!" she cried brightly. "Oh, we're young and healthy and strong and the things we can do—together! But stuck away in a dreary flat of three rooms I could do nothing to help—not even cook decently. Oh, Clell, won't you see it?"

"It's your standerd of life you're thinking of—not mine."

"It is, indeed. And our—our children. Do you



"No, that isn't my idea of a wife"



know what your standards would mean in New York—and to you and me—and the fight ahead?"

He stared at her. He was a bit old-fashioned. It hurt even to mention their children—the boy and I were much alike. But Mary went on evenly, without constraint.

"I simply wouldn't have them—that is all. Until we were ready. And that means sunny rooms, air and light and all the good things. No, no—I—" and she laughed queerly. "I won't. I want you to marry me, Clell—to-morrow. And we'll take a run of a month up in Maine, and then come back and set to work bravely and hopefully." Then her face set a bit hard—"In spite of everything. Your—your folly about Leila's money, and—and—what you've said—the hard things you've said—"

He laughed in his turn, mirthlessly. "On your money. No—that isn't my idea of a wife."

"Well, comrades then, dear—but together."

She was really trying, I could see. And she loved him—greatly, beautifully—with all her modernism and unsentimental wiseness and *isms* and cults—she loved him better than he could know.

"Think of what men 'd say—Redfield—his wife working. Down in the same office—and making five times what *he* does."

She shrugged: "Oh, well! I can't stop for what men say!"

"I—I've been straight," he went on moodily. "I've never done what a lot of fellows I know have done. I kept you in view always—and sometimes it was hard. The economic pressure that puts marriage off and makes such an awful evil mess of things for a lot of them—I fought the game both ways. Doctor Dick, you'll understand!"

"And so do I, Clell. Why shouldn't a woman know all truth—all life—and face it without fear? A man's strength—his protection—we don't need either. We need truth and freedom and work for our souls!"

We both stared at her. I thought I knew Mary Mason, but she had been getting away from me. That was clear now. And poor Clell!

"I won't be what you want me to be, Clell."

"I want you to help make a home for us."

"Yes, with these two hands—and this brain of mine. Oh, it would be glorious, dear—and you won't—you won't! I want to fight by your side—and you want to shut me in a cage and feed me through the bars!"

"Mary," I put in solemnly, "I—never heard you talk like this. Even when you graduated and all

refuse to make a home for a man—when you love him!"

"I am offering to make a home, Clell!" she answered simply. "I'm fighting for my home—for my children—for the children of every woman—fighting better than the old sort of women did. The children we refuse to bring into the world in dirt and poverty and disease—that's what we mean—we new women! That is the greatest love of all—the wisest, biggest, best. That is what we mean—we women!"

She had laid the ring upon the table. He did not take it. I tried to mutter something, just what, I don't know, except that they were the dearest of everything in the world to me—they and their happiness. But the next moment Clell was going, ignoring her and the ring entirely; and then he stopped, facing me dryly.

"Doctor Dick, that foolish investment of mine of Leila's money—criminal, I guess it was, the way the court looks at it. I—I—thank you. She"— he pointed his thumb back at Mary—"said you got it and it's in the court's hands. God bless you, Doctor Dick!"

"Bless you, boy!" I retorted with my fatal facility for blundering. "I never raised that confound-

ed money—when Mary told me yesterday, I was flat strapped. Then along came Williams and we held him up, seeing it was a matter of moments before court closed."

And at that moment—while I stared into the silence that fell between us all, not knowing what I had done—the bell rang. Another minute and Virgil Williams came in, in his usual direct manner past the maid. Virgil, who'd known Mary Mason in her lean childhood of the short-grass country.

The thing could not have been staged more egregiously coincidental. My speech, Clell's gasping wrath, Mary's silence—then Williams of Texas—from Louisiana, up here to sandbag reluctant millionaires for his drainage canals. We should all have been in the movies at that moment.

"You took it from Williams, Doctor Dick!" retorted Clell.

My attempt at nonchalance was the baldest taste: "Now, my dear chap—" I began; but Clell had leaped back before Mary.

"The man from Texas!" he cried. "I might have known! That's a part of it. Every year—sometimes twice a year he turns up here—and you—"

"Be still," said the Texan: "*You!*"

Clell swept around on him. "I owe you two thousand dollars."

"You owe—to Doctor Rainey—two thousand dollars," put in Mary, and her voice came from far cold spaces of impersonality.

"No!" Clell answered. "I—yesterday—my honor—so it was called—was endangered because I couldn't account for two thousand dollars in my little sister's property settlement. It—well, no matter where it went. But you—you dared call upon this man for help about it."

Virgil looked at him with a sudden dangerous alertness. But Clell was speaking to me as much as to Mary. Mary had had her say. She stood by her table looking down; the light on her brown hair, but I could not see her face.

"You wanted to break the engagement—you *wanted* to. I know!"

She merely shrugged.

"She offered to marry you to-morrow," I suggested. And I noticed a curious twist of the Texan's cheek, his lean brown face set harder. He kept his silence.

Then we were all still for a time. Clell broke it, turning again to the other man.

"Damn you—your meddling—your coming here.

But that's all past—I—personally—owe you two thousand dollars."

"All right." The other man's soft drawl had the caress of the south wind before the hurricane month: "You—personally—owe me two thousand dollahs."

Clell was a boy after all—facing a man. I knew him so well, his hot head, his way of leaping at things—and then the break. I was painfully expecting him to break now—a tremor to his voice, almost to tears—at his shame, his helplessness, his sense of wrong, and nothing would break him quicker than this last, poor chap!

He went on in a pretense of matter-of-fact business. "I can't pay you now. I—have left my position—am—going—away. But this"—he turned to me with a touch of his old fierceness—"remember, Doctor Dick, this is *my* debt. I—pay!"

I had to bow my head in assent. The boy would have throttled me if I had crossed him then. Mary still listened dispassionately.

"I'll give you—a note," poor Clell blundered on, and Virgil let the ghost of a smile to his lips.

"Note? I don't want a note. Down where I come from a man's word is a man's word. Yes, seh! You-all owe me two thousand dollahs. Down where I come from you'd learn a good deal of men.

Men out in the loneliness, fightin' away. They're pretty square, somehow. About money and with women. Yes, seh—you'd learn a good deal if you could stand up under a man's size game."

The younger man looked at him across the table. "I don't know. You'd have to show me. You aren't such a damned lot as I can see."

The southerner glanced at him a bit more softly from under his hat, which he had put on to go, as he always did, and then remembered to take it off when he reached the hall.

"A man's size game," he repeated. "Good-by, you-all. Miss Mary, I'll come in again before Wednesday mawnin' when I leave."

Mary did not stir. Clell it was who moved swiftly about the table. "Remember," he flashed out—"two thousand dollars!"

The other man laughed softly. The city youth followed again.

"Damn you, I could show you! Your man's game—I could knock your block off at it!"

The Texan squared around, gently folding his arms. "Yes? Oh, I reckon you could do—passable. I seen 'em from the cities that could get by with the work. But the lonesomeness—the bigness—with the sea runnin' in on you, and the silence—

well, you stick to you' little blue-prints and high stool, stranger, yet a while."

The remote scorn in that soft voice was something you can not suggest. But it found its way to the city man's soul. He reached to touch the other's arm, a tap of his forefinger.

"I owe you two thousand dollars. Maybe you got a job where a man could pay that out?"

"I got"—drawled the other—"a man's size job—for a man."

"I want it."

"Seh?"

"I'll go."

"Seh? With me?"

"Yes."

The silence fell again. I felt Mary was watching them with that sure, covert, careless poise of hers. That exquisite capability of Mary's was annoying now and then; and to a lover it might have been—well, I refused to pass judgment; my mind went disconsolately back to Crosby and his pipe. I wondered how the new vintage of femininity had been poured into such a cracked old bottle as he, if here was my hot young man in revolt at it. He madly wanted some primal fear, some barbaric unreason-

ableness in Mary, and she had, apparently, a mere unbiased appreciation of the deplorable situation.

The Texan had been measuring Clell, too; he spoke softly, and as if the other might have been a roustabout who asked him for a job on the levees.

"Ninety dollahs a month will start you. And grub. I cain't say just what you'll do. It's a right lonesome camp way off up in back."

He was at the door and then, from the elevator in the hall, turned: "Maybe you'll make good, Redfield. You have you' chance."

Then he had gone; and after a time in which there was no word from us, Clell went out. It cut me to the heart to have them part so. Clell and Mary—the two I loved. But when the boy was gone, Mary flew past the sad little silver things on the table that had been set for a bite with Clell and me this piteous evening.

"Doctor Dick!" she whispered, "they can't do it—they *can't*—hating each other! Clell—and Virgil—who gave me up to him long ago. Oh, something dreadful will happen!"

"Well," I answered: "you were not moved to say so before."

"How could I? Would Clell have listened? With

—with Virgil looking on, and—smiling? I had to let them make the test!"

"You succeeded very well, my dear. You are a bit super-civilized, as poor Clell imagines. Too detached, too complete, too—"

"Doctor Dick!"

"It appears so. I am trying to be dispassionate. But Clell feels he's failed, while you are **very** sure that *you* have not. And so he's turning utterly from your type of woman and your scheme of things. He wants something different—wholly barbarous, and to fling himself against it and win."

"But he's not that kind himself!"

I tried to smoke and conceal satisfaction at the flutter she was in. "But you'll go," she cried: "And see to them—that nothing dreadful does happen, Doctor Dick, dear!"

"It seems so. Virgil, confound him, wheedled most of my loose money into his land concern. But the fellow—somehow you can't help it."

"That's just it," she mused. "He loved me for twelve years—it took all that to convince him I couldn't marry him—dear solemn chap!" She sighed: "But once convinced, he has taken it superbly—as a big man would. He even told me of a girl down there—some wild creature who was

blocking all his great schemes somehow or other." Then she was thinking again: "Doctor Dick, do you think I should have given up everything just to be Clell's wife?"

"That is what men like to think, down in their souls—and some women, too. But utterly impractical, my dear—incomprehensibly silly! None but a savage would be so absurd as to love in any such fashion."

Mary stopped me with the first flash of anger I had ever seen in her and rang the bell for the tea silently. But I saw that as a savage, she was a sad failure!

And so it was that the three men of us came to Isle Bonne, and glimpsed back of it the shimmering canal, leading to the man's size job. At this end sat Allesjandro's wilful wood saint. She hardly appeared an insurmountable barrier even if abetted by the king of Spain.

## CHAPTER III

### ISLE BONNE

NOW from the sto' of my friend Prosper on Isle Bonne to the sto' of my friend Placide on Isle L'Ourse is not so far that one might not walk it in an hour, if there was anything to walk on which there is not; and anything to purchase at either establishment. Placide, in fact, having congratulated himself that his final customer, having purchased the last of his condensed milk—on credit—and having stolen the last of his peppers, with a morsel of garlic for lagnappe—he, also can peacefully sit on his gallerie and watch the lilies drift to the sea, unannoyed by such a banal thing as trade.

Papa Prosper, wearing huge horn goggles across his gray lank face and holding a two months' old New Orleans newspaper upside down, paddled out on his gallerie in his straw slippers to greet us with the courtesy due one's enemies.

"We were just passin' this way," murmured Vir-

gil. "And I thought you-all might as well know these two fel-los to begin with."

Papa bowed to the introductions. "Ah, messieurs! Ou' leetle isle—she is too much. Fo' why gentlemen quarrel? M'sieu Williams, fo' fou' years now he says: 'Papa, pretty soon yo' have to get out.' I say: 'Fo' why all dis?' M'sieu Williams, he say: 'We sue you fo' dis leetle isle, and yo' betteh come to dat cou't.'" Papa Prosper sighed amiably: "Me, I don't go fo' nuttin'. All a-time somebody he sue fo' dis leetle isle. Sixty years now, all a-time somebody sue fo' ou' leetle isle, messieurs; and me—I sit here on my gallerie, jus' lak a millionaire."

Virgil sighed gently in return. He shook his head lugubriously. Papa Prosper was waving a hand to the darkened hall of his house.

"Coffee, mademoiselle, fo' messieurs."

But mademoiselle was not there. I saw her now stealing from the ragged clump of latanier palm that enrobed the shoulders of Papa Prosper's wild sweet garden, and crossing the shell ridge to her former perch on the bole of the ancient oak. I saw another there, a lazy dark-eyed boy stretched outright in his green pirogue among the jutting knees of the cypress in the water. He had

peered at us from the shadowy recesses, and now, when the girl crept again to her niche in the great tree, he settled back quite content.

Papa eyed this finely indifferent evasion of his paternal authority. Coffee for messieurs from her hands was plainly not forthcoming. The toss of her long braid over her left shoulder as she sat was cruelly meant for the New York fel-los. Papa sighed again, and with a long forefinger raised the horn goggles upon his nose reflectively.

"Ah, dis worl'! She is too much. Me—I—Prosper Drouillot—fo' why I go sue somebody? Laure—all a-time, she come back from John-the-Fool and say: 'Papa, dem Yankee fel-los dig and dig and dig in ou' leetle isle—*bom!* Sooch a noise—sooch a smoke dat dredge, he mak! Why doan yo' sue somebody?' *Le bon Dieu*, and dem lawyers I trust fo' ou' leetle isle. So Laure go back to Messieur le Baron, and Messieur le Baron, he roar. Lak a beeg steamboat when he blow up—sooch a noise!"

He waved us to the long benches against the honeysuckle shade of his gallerie. Then he was gone within and to his coffee-dripping.

"There was some mail," put in Williams, as we idled. "I gave it to you, Doctor Dick—remembeh?"

I had forgotten some gimcrack of a card given us at the last port of call of the bi-weekly mail-boat—a shrimp camp twenty miles up the tidal lakes. Only the name; and the picture of some boys' school in New Orleans. I went back to my coat left on the lugger, and then an idea seized me of securing recognition from our recalcitrant wood saint. So I paused at the oak tree by the shell ridge margin and with air and bow of my best twenties extended the resplendent card to her

“Mademoiselle Laure, I have the honor—”

Then there was a most glorious fight. The lazy dark-eyed boy started up from his green pirogue, almost upsetting the craft and pulling Laure off the log into the water. He snatched at the post-card and their hands came together. Out the wood saint reached and fastened her other hand in the youth's curly hair. Off fell his sweetheart's garland; over he fell—splash! And she atop of him! Up they came dripping and breathless, scrambling along the shell beach. But the saint had her gingerbread card.

“Pig!” she called back with fathomless contempt and triumph. “Pig—pig—pig!”

Up she climbed on the shaky planks to me, the

scant blue-gray skirt she wore clinging to her slimness, her breasts heaving. She turned to me with angry laughter.

"*Merci, messieur!* My card he treat that a-way!" She cast her scorn back to the wet lover who was after his morning catch of crabs scrambling this way and that. "Pig! Now I love Antoine! Never he do that." She treasured Antoine's limp card ever so tenderly to her damp cheek. "He never waste his life with mostly crabs. He going on and on in the world—sometime he be a barbeh!"

The defeated one was crushed. Disconsolately he held up his luckless basket. "Fo'ty cents of crabs I lost, m'sieu! Fo' why?—dat girl!" He sighed and turned away. "Wan time, sometime, I go off and see the worl'—and be a sto' clerk!"

I, too, sighed. Will we never be done with it? Isle Bonne was not large enough, nor its wood deep enough, nor its sky high enough to contain love without rancor. I feared we had come to the wrong place with our own doleful tale. I looked back at Clell who had got out on the docks and was interestingly staring at Laure. The Texan's glance was on her. She read lovelorn Antoine to the clammy end. Then—with a voice whose soft malice was just raised to the wet one's hearing—she turned:

"Papa, Antoine say he not think he got money for school this winteh all a-time, so he come back and marry me!"

Papa Prosper pattered down to us, his two months' old paper still under his arm, and removed his huge horn goggles.

"Ah, m'sieu, dat girl! All a-time marry somebody! Dat what a-happen to my pig, m'sieu. All a-time somebody come marry Laure!"

Now from under the red sto' wandered a pig. A white pig about whose ample girth was trimly set a rusty barrel hoop. We gazed in wonder. The Texan was laughing softly. Clell looked at it with the first trace of a smile since we left the North. Apparently it interested his engineer's technique.

"Doctor Dick, what I'd like to know is, did they put the pig in the barrel hoop, or the barrel hoop around the pig? Still, what's it to do with marrying Laure?"

"The' a story." The Texan was speaking. "But don't start Papa Prosper on it now. You see—" Virgil paused suddenly. Clell's back was to him. And that pitiless silence fell; the two had not spoken directly to each other since that night. Not as man to man. Through and to me the necessary speech was made. And the thing was shriveling my soul.

I had hoped Clell would put away that savagery down here. But Virgil looked at me with his faint patient smile and nodded. Our hosts did not notice. Allesjandro was already on his lugger poling her out through the lily masses, and midstream I heard his: "Blow, San Anton—é!"

We were alone in Virgil's world. He had promised us loneliness. I looked across the broad bayou. Beyond its floating gardens the prairie cane stretched pathlessly northward. To eastward lay the first of the chain of tidal lakes. At the near point their sunken shores become a gleam of milk white shells and here an oak grove grew. But over this thin shore-margin began again the trembling prairie, stretching illimitably southward. Back of us lay Isle Bonne's cypress swamp, a gray wondrous jungle with the moss plumes hanging to the black water.

The Texan saw my lingering glance. "Ain't they trees? It's the last untouched cypress, I reckon in all Louisiana. By Mighty, but the's timbeh in there! Worth ninety thousand dollehs, and the old son-of-a-gun,—well, go look in his shack there and see how he and Laure keep house!"

Inside the sto' I saw as much as eight tins of corned beef and six of condensed milk and two sacks

of flour and one of green coffee. Also a stack of mink and muskrat pelts and a bundle of rusty traps and a barrel of red wine with an agate measure under the tap. The rest of the shelves were free of merchandise. And yet, looking on through that dismal store I saw the sunshine falling on a brilliant red carpet square on which sat a quaint table and on that a lace covering quite severely elegant. Through the far door the bees were humming against the wet glitter of honeysuckle, jasmine, blackberry bloom sprawling all over their stilted hives above the water, and up on the latanier palms to the enshrouding gray of the mossed cypress. Isle Bonne was a sad fizzile as an island—a mere half mile of shell reef that a twelve-hour wind tide would cover from bayou side to the spiked swamp.

But Virgil, who had come with me into the sto' suddenly smote his palms. "We don't want his big cypress! We want to dig a main ditch behind it to get our two holdin's drained to the same pumping plant. And the old crab, when we offer him forty thousand dollehs just for a quit-claim when he had no manneh of title to show, that girl wouldn't let him. So the company will have to go ahead and dispossess 'em—soon as the Supreme Cou't confirms

our deeds from the French line of 'em. Sho'—they neve' had a chance—but I couldn't make 'em see it. Spent two years tryin' to save somethin' out of the wreck for Papa and his girl, and along comes that boa'd of directors and say I hung up the job on account of heh!"

"Mary remarked," I mused: "that there was a —girl."

"First, the's a job," he muttered, and then his high smile came: "Only it's right lonesome here. Used to come around the island to pass the time of day with Prosper, and she—why, she ran inside and closed the blinds like I was a blamed pizen snake. But what can you expaict when they were pirates—the Drouillots—and used to run their slave brigs right up into John-the-Fool and hide 'em. Only Laure, she's gone to school in N'Awlyins convent, and ought to know betteh."

His worn blue eyes smiled again. "Well, we'll hang out here until Big Jim sends the launch around fo' us. To-morrow"—he eyed Clell who was grimly silent as ever:—"the dredge will start. Yes, seh—I expaict it will. They told me I'm crazy—they told me to lay up the machines—no mo' money this year unless we win the case so Driscoll can sell the bonds. And I told 'em the work would go

on—I took an option on that ten thousand acres on the outside—personal and specified, and contracted to drive a fo'ty-foot ditch through to it—just to show 'em how *I* believed! Yes, seh—drive that old mud hook into salt water by Septembeh. Maybe I'm crazy—all right; I know land, and I know men—and to-morrow the dredge starts. That old machine is *me*—personal and specified."

Then I first saw the man's rugged weariness. He had been doubted, censured, laughed at. He was not the sort you would call a dreamer but he had visioned the most daring of all the south coast reclamation schemes; he was not what you would term a lover, but a rare sweetness was about him always.

He raised his hand to indicate the gray pall of the forest. His forefinger seemed to feel for the faint air.

"Listen," he murmured: "You can hear it, Doctor Dick. The gulf is singin' at me. Behind the woods the salt prairie begins, and behind that the last reef. They told me it couldn't be done—that Isle Bonne was the last sweet land, but I'll build my levee thirty miles the other side. And drive the sea out with the biggest pumps eve' put into a ditch in Louisiana—I got 'em, too! Right across this island, rusting in the swamp at John-the-Fool.

That's what makes me so sorry—my big pumps rustin', and that boa'd of directors tell me to lay up work fo' a year. That's why I took that option—personal and specified. If I don't finish the ditch why, then I'm broke—personal and specified. And that Cleveland fel-lo sayin' I laid down on the work fo' a—a *girl!*"

She had come out as the last soft scorn of his voice died away. Papa Prosper ambled after with his tray and coffee cups. Upon the gallerie rail the mistress of Isle Bonne sat herself and looked us over briefly. She had the air of conceding an indifferent point to hospitality; but serve coffee?—"jamais—jamais!" I heard her murmur.

"Dis isle, messieurs," went on Prosper, "he ain't much fo' trade. So we eat up ou' sto'. She fine while she last. Now dat sto' gone I sit here on my gallerie. Mebbe sometime I go to N'Awlyins and spend two dollehls a day just lak a millionaire. But Mademoiselle Laure, neve' she let me sell ou' leetle isle. All dem leetle birds dey sing in all dem big trees, say *mon chere* Laure; is not dat enough fo' happy?"

Laure shrugged with relenting grace; perhaps at closer glance the New York fel-los were not so bad. "Happy? Antoine, he went off to see the

world—and now what you think? He say it not so much to be a barbeh! He'd rather come back and marry me." She laughed her triumph; then her long-lashed and star-deep eyes narrowed side-wise in their glance upon my friend Clell. There was a suggestion that her interest was for him alone though her words were to us all.

"Papa, the gentlemen come fo' to buy our island?"

Papa shrugged; I disclaimed any such sinister purpose.

Isle Bonne's mistress looked at me as if she might easily suspect me of lying. "Then you are engineers?"

"Not at all, mademoiselle."

"Then you are detectives? Some-a-times the's bad men hide out in the deep swamp. Old Pierre! Papa, yo' remembeh Old Pierre what one-a-time kill somebody?"

"Dat ol' scoundrel—wan time he stole my fish trap."

Laure clapped her hands. Somewhere, by our heads, as we sat along the sto' gallerie, a tree-frog was singing in the honeysuckle that was massed over Papa Prosper's rain barrels. "Be still—you! Papa, make dat frawg be still!"

Papa rustled the honeysuckle indolently. Laure laid that ever-so-distant glance of hers on my distract friend again. "Then I reckon, you are fawt-chune-tellers?"

Clell laughed—the first of his old real honest laughs since—well, the night of Virgil's challenge.

"Mademoiselle, can you tell mine, now? Doctor Dick, I'd like to know!"

Virgil was watching the two. And I—well, I had not known Clell all his life for nothing. He made friends of women with fatal ease—all of them in the old days, with his boy's wholesomeness, his good looks, his saying to them of the things they wished best to believe of themselves. Since his manhood it had not changed greatly. I had wondered at Mary's patience, yet he had loved her best and truest. After all they like his sort. He had not found himself—that was the trouble.

Our small saint ignored his query. "Papa, maybe they come fo' to dig pirates' treasure?"

I laughed then. Virgil relented to a smile. Clell turned to me good-humoredly. "Doctor Dick, that would be best of all!"

Laure did not relish our taking of it. "Why, we got mo' pirate hide-ups in our reefs than most anybody! Some-a-time I let you dig one."

"Thank you," retorted Clell gravely, "just show me!"

The tree-frog was yelling again. In that sweet noon silence it was terrific. Laure clapped her hands and the disturber keyed lower. But when the talk resumed he yelled the louder.

"Dat little tree-hop—" said Papa Prosper, and began to part the honeysuckle masses. He found the tree-frog and threw him gently off the gallerie. "Now, it'll take him an hour to get back in ou' cistern and we can talk a while, m'sieu."

But we couldn't. The ambitious tree-hop was back behind the gallerie rail in half the time and resuming his discords. Papa scolded and hurled him again into watery exile under the gallerie posts. Virgil arose and paced the sto'. I saw his eyes go out across the pathless salt marsh past the blue wall of the cypress forests.

"This old cuss and his tree-frawg! For six years I been comin' here to pass the time of day. Papa and his tree-frawg and his pig in the barrel hoop—and Laure; and out there, Doctor Dick, my dredge is goin' to junk, and the lilies are fillin' the ditches I dug, and the sweet land is getting saltier year by year. And up nawth Driscoll and his crowd hold off that money and tell me to lay up—

till we win and the bonds are sold.” Always he came back to the matter; down in his soul he knew he was edging close to failure at last; he had thrown the last dice for our fortunes. And Laure of the isle, refusing his compromise, three years ago, and insisting on the battle which the New Orleans lawyers had made, had brought him to the breaking point.

She suddenly, it appeared, discovered a new means to ruffle him. Watching her mobile and tender mouth, I saw it tighten with demure guile. Perhaps she guessed some hidden issue between them; at any rate, a sparkle came to her eyes as she turned on my stubborn young friend from the city, and struck her small brown hands together.

“My honey bees! M’sieu, would you see my honey bees?”

“I would that very thing.” Clell sat up straighter: “Honey bees—or pirates—or—or—anything, Mademoiselle Laure, that is of your little isle. A wonderful little isle, and I—I’m sorry!”

She looked at him with rare attentiveness. And under her lashes to the other man, who could never tell her he was sorry. Then she clapped her hands with a sheer joy it seemed. “And my little gown that came from Paris? Ah, m’sieu, you neve’

thought that? One time I went to the opera in N'Awlyins—oh, very fine it was! I stayed at my grand-aunt's, Madam Beauvais' on the Esplanade, and went to a ball of Comus. Oh, that was very fine, too! Madam Beauvais say to Papa Prosper: ‘You must mortgage some land so Laure can have a gown from Paris,—what you think of that, m’sieu? Ah, and then back to Isle Bonne I came like Cinderella!’

We looked after them, Clell laughing as they discussed gowns and the eccentricities of tree-frawgs. Virgil’s old wistfulness came: “That boy—he cain’t make me hate him—after all.”

Papa Prosper offered more coffee and sighed over his tree-hop.

“Dat frawg, m’sieu, is crazy fo’ conversation. Wan time I held cou’t, and fo’ times I told my constable to chase dat frawg off my rain barrel.”

“You—a justice?”

Papa stirred his coffee. “Fo’ times I been elected, m’sieu. I neve’ yet got up to the riveh to qualify, but they keep on electin’ me. Wan time I had a marryin’. A Manilaman from Grand Lake and a Chino lady from Bassa Bassa camp. Dat lady she say: ‘Papa, huccome yo’ marry us w’en yo’ no got no papeh fo’ justice?’ So to please dat lady I got

out my seed catalogue. Dat Manilaman say: 'Yo' sho' dis marryin' stick on dat seed book?' I say: 'Cou'se she stick—you go home and see if she not stick.' M'sieu, she stuck fine—dat lady got six babies now, and five shares in wan shrimp seine."

We passed a sunlit day. To the landing of my friend Prosper come all the lake and bayou folk, shrimp skiffs, trade boats, pirogues, derelict house-boats from the great river to the North—from Barataria to Butte La Rose, from Isle Grande to Whisky Bay—from the orange groves of the lower coast to the sugar plantations of Terrebonne—the wanderers came to throw a head-line to the wharf, "holler out" the justice and stay, some ten minutes to drip coffee; some five years to catch the crabs and muskrat. Papa sat on his gallerie and welcomed—and waved them amiably on. Of course the Yankees—well, one never could tell about Yankees. They were an uncertain lot, forever diving off in the deep swamp with blue-prints, and unloading machinery on their forlorn landing in the sun-beaten cane around Point Coquille, and cursing the mosquitoes and the heat and the damp and the snakes and the cajuns—and then coming out to sit on Papa's tranquil gallerie and watch Laure who didn't know how to be rich when she was. Papa, the ad-

venturous soul, would have traveled—at least as far as Mawgan City; but Laure? She preferred to sit here and watch curiously these profane strangers.

"I would like to see dat Sheecawgo," went on Prosper. "Wan time Ettienne he work for the fish commish, and dey took him to Washington. Sooch sights he tell me of. Dat government—Ettienne say sooch a dome he got! And dat prasident! Ettienne say he walk right in and look up dat dome—*sacre*—so high! Ettienne he say neve' he think he see dat. Dat prasident he sit at one end makin' laws and dat congress he sit at odder end makin' laws, and Ettienne say sooch talk neve' could he make out. M'sieu, I sho' lak to see dat präsident and his dome—I believe so."

He sighed and looked at the wilful wood saint who would not travel for fear Yankees would come and cut her mighty trees, putting pull-boats along the shell shores with steel cables like the tentacles of horrible monsters to tear out the life-blood from the forest's heart, turning the lilyed pools to slime with their dirty rafts and quarter-boats. And the drainage ditches, little better with their black mud levees traveling the iridescent sheen of the trembling prairies that had stirred at nothing before save the whir of the wild duck's wing and the pirogue run-

ner's paddle. She had been quizzing Clell in my absence. She greeted me with quite friendly glances; it was only for the land boss that her scorn was reserved.

"Ah, I show you my garden, M'sieu Doctor—and you"—she put out her brown hand with rare sudden gaiety to Clell. "My poor little bees tumbling down all a-time in their houses into the black water!"

Poor swamp bees indeed! Never would Papa Prosper wade out to put new stilts under their hives. The decayed boxes hung at all angles in a wild sweet tangle of iris, red flags, palms, banana trees, figs and hyacinths; and over them the orioles and scarlet tanagers flitted in the crepe myrtle and jasmine clambering the ancient trunks to the gloom of the moss.

*"Le Bon Dieu,* He looked after my bees, but somehow we neve' get any honey. Papa say sometime he read his seed catalogue and see what it say about honey—if it marry folks so well, it sho' ought to know about honey." And she glanced up brightly at the tall young Yankee. "If I marry a man he got to know all about honey."

I left them in that swamp garden with the droning of the bees and the flit of the tanagers about

them—what had I to do with honey? I got my feet well wet trying to get back to Papa Prosper's galerie, for the passage from the bee garden was along the bottom of an overturned dugout across two broken iron kettles. If you fell off this bridge the kettles were thoughtfully filled with water to receive you. I was sleepy and annoyed. Papa Prosper had already excused himself for his siesta. Virgil sat back against the rail, his sombrero over his eyes. The warmth, the droning bees, the traitorous content of Laure's isle—well, I couldn't keep an eye open longer, and was off, sitting in my chair.

A mosquito it was that brought me out of that warm and sticky nap. One of the big, deep-sea going mosquitoes speeding from out the western gulf marshes, a herald of the oncoming evening hordes. He hit me squarely on the nose and I opened my eyes upon a splash of gold which was the sun level over the lake. And I rubbed my eyes again to stare at the phantasmagoria that an hour had wrought. The mirrored water had disappeared from the cove; it was a wondrous garden of deep purple and waxy green from shore to shore, the wild hyacinths moving slowly, a tide of bloom drifting from out the sweet water of the upper swamp to die in the salt passes of the gulf. And far beyond the barrier I

heard Laure singing. I saw her now—the two of them in her tiny green pirogue, a slender needle boat that seemed to quiver beneath Clell's weight. It was never fashioned for two—unless, perhaps, for lovers.

Virgil sat across the gallerie rail regarding me. I knew he had just turned from the two in the canoe when he heard my stir.

"The launch is comin'," he said quietly. "I can hear her motor. We'll get to our own camp to-night. Redfield"—he motioned to the hyacinth blockade—"we'll pick him up outside the lilies—*she* cain't get in till the drift passes."

"They don't seem to care," I answered—"either of them."

The Texan looked up slowly and in silence; then his patient smile came.

"Doctor Dick," he went on at length, "I stepped aside once fo' him—that town man. I played square with him—fo' Mary's sake. I brought him down here—fo' Mary's sake. Now I wondeh what sort of stuff is in him—if he can play square with me. I stepped aside fo' him."

"Virgil," I retorted, "do you love her—this girl?"

"Cain't you see? When they sent me down here to put through the ditches she was a little thing, all eyes and laigs, who used to peek out of this do' at the Yankees who were tryin' to buy the land. Then we started to work behind the island, and then the big fight came. And I hung on when the rest quit. I stuck on the job when the big stawm came and the sea went ove' Isle Bonne eight feet deep. She was a little thing, and I carried her to the boats—and she neve' fo'gave me fo' puttin' hands on her. And then I watched her grow; and all the time we drove the ditches through her prairie, she hated me. I thought, maybe—well, we neve' could make 'em take a dolleh in compromise, so the directors fought it to the finish with Prosper's lawyers. And the finish'll come now—they'll lose—and I'm the man that did it. She hates me—I'm the land pirate. She's neve' let me say two words to her. If she could beat *me* maybe I'd have a chance. And now, Redfield—well, he's a town man, and he can talk."

He was still, looking into the wall of gray-mossed cypress above the white shell beaches of Isle Bonne.

"And I promised Mary I'd send him back to her—a man. Yes, seh—fo' Mary!"

The wood saint was waving gaily to me from the

flower-locked prison. When she noticed Virgil, her hand was still. Around the point the rescuing launch was speeding; she watched it with hostile interest.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE BARON

I SLEPT that night on some ill-smelling blankets under a mosquito bar in a corrugated iron shack after a rush eastward from Isle Bonne woods through a shadowy lake, about a far marsh point and then up a forty-foot canal which turned westward again through an illimitable stretch of prairie cane behind the island.

We had retired in the starlight and in such silence as you of the town can not dream of. Somewhere to southward was the murmur of the gulf, faint, eerie, hardly a breath on the still air. But the morning showed that we were at the abandoned pumping plant of the Prairie Meadows Land Company, and westward from it the canal still ran like a bright arrow through the rozo cane which was tawny and green and all alive with flecks of sun and shade and rustlings in the breeze. A narrow ridge of black earth followed the canal to the van-

ishing point either way; just here the channel widened to a basin about which were great heaps of plunder under the iron roofed sheds. Sacks of concrete, barrels of cement, lumber, coal, oil tanks and machinery ill-housed and rusted and with grass growing forlornly in crevices where the birds had scattered seed; a cook-house with the windows dirty and staring—over it all the silence of failure, the man's size job hung as at a dismal gibbet.

I found Williams looking down in a twenty-five foot excavation where the scummy pools covered the frames of the first concrete he had sunk about his piling before the directors halted his attack. A single old colored man was with him, the watchman of the deserted plant, who was explaining some affair of the previous week.

"Dey done shot at me, Misteh Williams." The old fellow raised his stick and pointed northward to the blue wall of cypress which was the nearer side of Laure's isle: "Yes, suh—dey done snuck out o' John-the-Fool and gib me mah wa'nin.' Fust dey gib me mah sign, and den dey shot."

"Who did?"

"Dem ole pirate folkses. Nex' boat Ah'm goin' out front to de river—neveh no good come outer dem Drouillots fo' culled folks. Reckon ole Ar-

mand's ghost done snuck back when yo' start to cuttin' up his island."

"Uncle Piney, you go get us some breakfast," Virgil said, and smiled at me aside. "I'll send you out front if you want to go." But when the old fellow had hobbled away, the land boss' face grew long. "Last nigger I could keep on the job here—the old yarns about this place got them clean scared away." He looked about the abandoned plant, and the old patient twitch came to his lean lips. "All right. This ain't my doin'. Up the ditch, Doctor Dick—see that smoke? That's *me*—that old mud-hook. That levee is goin' up clean to seaward by September or the's one Texas man I know'll be planted. That's *me*—personal and specified—ordehs or no ordehs. I'm saving that option on ten thousand acres that the company was willin' to let slide."

A tiny plume of smoke to the west was all the sign of life in that green and yellow silence—the clam-shell dredge fighting at the end of the unfinished canal. One man had not quit of all the quitters.

We walked about the melancholy ruin and breakfasted in the shade of Uncle Piney's shack with the stinging black gnats dancing in one's vision. Clell

had hardly spoken, even to me this morning; it seemed the specter of failure sat grinning at him also.

"Those New York fel-los don't know the dredge is runnin'. They told me to lay her up with the work on the pumps."

"Well," I put in, "just how did you get the money?"

"Money?" he smiled benignly, as one might to foolish questions of finance from a child. "Nobody's got any money—much. Big Jim and the fel-los on the dredge—why, they just *believe*—that's all. And I got oil on my word that I'd *win*—Doctor Dick, I just made 'em see."

I took a stalk of cane and walked out past the sheds where eighty thousand dollars' worth of machinery were rusting and two thousand sacks of cement were turning to stone, and thrust it down in the salt swamp ooze outside the levee. There was no bottom; the stuff was thinner every foot of the way.

"I understand now, the story of the baby buggy," I said dryly. "Virgil, have you the nerve to say that some day you'll sell this for *farms*?"

"Yes, seh. If I have to stand 'em on end and dry 'em out."

"It's just as well," I went on, "that the board of directors have never seen it. I couldn't quite answer for them."

The Texan looked gravely at me. "Seh?"

"I'm glad I came down to inspect it instead of Mr. Driscoll."

"The' was a man on the Brazos once who insinuated that I was a crook," continued the man from the short-grass country. "Sho', I hate to tell about it—only the coroner's jury acquitted me, Doctor. But I reckon I can see what you mean. One of the people that bought stock was a widda woman—and some friends of mine; so if I lose, I'm a crook. All right—I take the chance."

And when we were off again in the launch speeding up the canal to the vanishing point in the floating prairie, the Texan pointed southward. "Sometimes, when the sea comes up outside, you can almost feel this *floteau* shake with the poundin'. When the big stawms come, it's a right lonesome country."

I well believed. In half an hour we swept out of the canal into a great pool that stretched northward into the fringe of the moss-plumed woods. A mere cove it was, but beyond it I thought there was a house, perched, after the fashion of the

swamp dwellers, on stilts above the storm tides and the black swamp water. The Texan stopped the launch abruptly between the overhanging walls of wild cane with the smoke plume far ahead. I saw in the last fringe of the dying forest, two great brick chimneys rearing above some patches of mangrove. We floated slowly on toward the forest cove.

The Texan raised his hand. "They tried plantin' once—cane and rice, and then the sea came in on 'em in '54. The' was a big sugar house and a dwellin' somewhere here where old Pierre Drouillot worked his niggers. But I expaict he wasn't any better than the rest of 'em—the old pirate ones. Now, Prosper, hangin' on to his shell ridge on the other side the island and fishin' his crabs, is a gentleman—only he ain't any manneh of sense. He hung on to his swamp here for fo'ty years fo' no other reason than because it was give to 'em by the king of Spain. That's the word he sent the cou't—he ain't no manneh of sense. And Laure—well, I don't know. I got no call to fight a laidey."

He was staring ahead from the launch and spoke as if to himself: "Stawms and stockbrokers and women—a man cain't stop fo' 'em." He looked curiously again into the forest cove: "And while

we're passin' I'll introduce you to the Baron of John-the-Fool. I expaict I will."

"The baron?"

He smiled with his gentle tolerance, even at Clell who would not greet him. Then, swinging the wheel over, the boat drifted on into this glade of the sunken forest. On, a hundred yards and we were enclosed by the sepulchral cypress. I can not describe the sensation of the change from the glitter of the prairie to that spot of silence. The spikes of the huge trees thrust up out of the black clear water, and to them hung the fantastic moss plumes. Only one thing of color relieved the gray-brown light of the flooded woods and that was the latanier palms—a single clump of which sat with an unreal stage effect behind the platform to which we had drifted. On that platform, hung from trunk to trunk above the water, sat a slab and palmetto hut with a mud chimney rising at one end. To the cypress spikes beneath was moored a flat-end john-boat in which sat a lank pointer-pup apparently waiting for some one to assist him up to his aerial home.

"Hi, you poor web-footed kyoodle," murmured Virgil, "where is the baron?"

The kyoodle grinned innocently. Virgil lifted the

johnboat paddle and slammed it mightily upon the boards. And there waddled out of the swamp shack the most curious figure of a man I had ever seen. Vast and rotund was he, with a faded sash of silken brilliance about his waist, and in his green hat was stuck a rooster feather. He removed a remarkable pipe from his mouth, and then bowed down to us, with astounding ease, seeing that the effort made him wheeze and all but wrinkled his eyes shut. Then one of them popped wide open, brightly upon us; and his vast roguish laughter followed.

“Ah, the gentlemen have arrived! Allesjandro—assist the gentlemen!” He pounded on the platform. “You will pardon me, messieurs, but my pipe—eh, my pipe! It is twenty-four inches long and twenty-four years old, and must be smoked with extreme care. A pipe, messieurs, to go with good wine, friends and talk of women we have loved. Allesjandro—*attendez!*”

And around that shack came the manikin Manilaman who had brought us to Isle Bonne in his lugger yesterday. I was astonished. Allesjandro crowed with delight. Ah, the Senors—certainly! He reached a boat-hook to Virgil’s craft, jabbering

in Spanish-French and execrable English. Welcome to the baron's. Yes—yes—he had told all about us; his master was delighted; we must come up for coffee and conversation. He gave us a hand, two hands—anything.

His master gave us a benign eye. There was a rare air of the world in the salutation in the middle of that impossible swamp. And a bit of the clown, too, as he twiddled the shank of his pipe. He surveyed us from a benevolent amplitude of satisfaction with himself and with fortune; so a good round monk might have hastened to succor two wayfarers to his shelter for the night. What with the length of his pipe and the width of his stomach he had some trouble in passing his door—but he welcomed us there with a mischievous grace.

Outside Virgil was tying his boat to one of the crazy piles supporting the baronial hall. The baron waved to him condescendingly.

“My good friend—and bad luck to him and his schemes—has not introduced us as gracefully as he might. You are Doctor Richard Rainey, and this is Mr. Redfield—is it not so? I am Baron John de Vedrinnes—there is a good deal more to it, but let that be. Welcome!”

"How"—I nearly gasped—"did you know us?"

"Ah!" He closed his jester's eye and grew apoplectic. "Le marquise!"

And he bowed again, after the fashion of a porpoise that recalled its dancing lessons of a previous incarnation. Then I saw behind him a small and not at all unpleasing breakfast table laid and at it, regarding us with complete composure, our hunter of honey of Isle Bonne.

The baron exploded with his appreciation of our surprise. He held his sides—and the pipe. Allesjandro, with fervent pleasure, was drawing chairs for us. Virgil came in, took off his hat with some amiable patience at this foolery, and merely watched us.

Laure, presiding at the coffee—and I recall what a mass of rare and battered old bronze was the baron's coffee urn—looked with long sidewise demureness at Clell's reaching for a place beside her.

"I told him all about you. Two Yankee fel-los. And he was in the awmy, and the *Yankees* he has killed—it isn't polite to speak about at breakfast."

"How did you get here?" we burst out together, disregarding that melancholy reminder of the baron and other Yankee fel-los.

"My running pirogue—through the deep swamp.

There were some honey bees swarming, and Papa Prosper, he just let them go which-away."

Follow a honey bee through that fantastic swamp! I sat down and regarded her. She was cutting bread. Virgil eyed her with patience. She had not spoken to him. Then I saw Allesjandro, behind the master's chair, motioning for silence. The baron had closed his eyes and was growling a long Latin prayer. I closed one eye—the other was upon Laure—who also had one closed. Merely one—the other winked at Allesjandro. On that prayer droned. It was interminable. The baron appeared to claw it out of his whiskers, but the rich old medieval phrases never faltered. Yet, at length, I was sure he was laughing. Then Laure manifestly giggled. And the majordomo suddenly howled with glee. Then they all roared. Clell and I opened our eyes injuredly. Virgil had a calm smile.

The joke was on us. The Baron de Vedrinnes was protesting his apologies. "Ah, that Babisch! Gentlemen, I am trying to pay off my score with him. He was my tutor in Hungary—that damned Capuchin. Four hundred florins a year and his wine he got for mauling his prayers into me—and after eighty years I can not forget a word of them.

That was what I got when I was a boy—dingdong—singsong—and now I can not refrain. Four hundred florins and all the wine he could drink, got Babisch—and when he had his wine first, the prayers were twice as long!"

He wiped his eyes; it was rude to a guest, but life was made to joke at. There was a mosquito on my neck—would I allow him courteously to burn it off with his hot pipe? Ah, there it was done—and a mere blister would not matter! No one could love a Barataria mosquito—no, no! There were too many of them—there would not be enough love to go around!

Then he went on complacently to tell of himself. No one else got in a word. He told of his youth in a military school in Buda-pest, and how, later, in some political troubles of the forties, he had had to leave Hungary. There was a hint of a woman, and he winked with vast wickedness. Then he wandered about Europe, a penniless soldier of fortune, and came to America, entering a Florida regiment of the Confederacy in the Civil War. Then he made a fortune in the Louisiana lottery, and when that concern was squelched, he lost it. He had been a slave runner, privateer, gambler, what-not—and it was all good. Life had been a pageant

and he had seen; a brawl and he had fought; a kiss and he had the sweetness; but why now, he was retired to the abysmal forest of Isle Bonne—ah, that, he did not tell us!

But life was still good when he could wear his rooster's feather in a green hat, and burn mosquitoes off of Yankee necks with a hot pipe. Ah, yes—accept the rice *jambalaya*, the coffee and bread and shrimp. His man Friday—the butler-fisherman, Allesjandro, just now squirming so delightedly behind his chair—he and God saw to it somehow, that there was enough to eat; and when the palmetto roof of the baronial hall leaked, the baron merely ordered his bed moved from the larger leaks to the smaller ones and played his phonograph under the mosquito bar until the morning.

We listened to all this and it was the last touch to the impossible adventure. The baron was gratified that we had come—we gentlemen of the great world. No one came to see him except his Cajun-Filipino neighbors from the far *chenieres* over the south coast marshes. And they were shy furtive men with whom one could not speak of affairs of chancellories and empire demarcations. He would put us up—we must stay a week, a month—a year? There was an amazing deal to talk of.

I couldn't get in a word. No one could. The baron shot quite about the globe in his archaic relation of events and surmises. I answered as best I could, numberless questions. How was that affair in the Balkans? And the stealing of *Mona Lisa*? Who was Franz Joseph's ambassador at Washington now? And did we like Barataria, the legend-haunted?

Our small wood saint listened with condescending composure as she poured the *café au lait condense*. After all the world's way from crabs to courts was not so far; she could well send Antoine on and on to be a barbeh, and still be the confidante of nobility.

Our noble friend waved Allesjandro aside when he pressed us with more of his rice *jambalaya*. "Our guests have breakfasted, they say. That is, perhaps, our fortune—we had reckoned on but enough for three. And mademoiselle, she will have a famous relish after her five o'clock pursuit of her honey bees."

I was watching them both, and I can not explain just what firm conviction entered my mind that Laure's honey bees were a myth. No—no! There was a mystery here. Allesjandro's ingenuous grin at his master confirmed it.

"Curious," drawled Virgil, "but I never saw a honey bee in the deep swamp—beyond the forty-ar-pent line. They's mostly on the *cheniere*."

She gave him a grimace; he did not believe—and she knew it. The honey bees were clearly to delude Yankee fel-los. Virgil, she feared, and was trying to detest—that was also clear. Was not his black monster of a dredge tearing the heart from her beloved island? Still, there was more than this—much more. I tried to guess at it, as she devoted her demure interest to Clell; she drew him out of his moroseness—he laughed aloud again with her.

Virgil suddenly pushed back his chair. "Well, we got to shag along, Doctor Dick. The new man—" he looked easily at Clell: "Big Jim is waitin' fo' to organize his new crew."

The baron followed us to the edge of his platform with many protests—yet I was sure he was pleased that we were gone. He waved his pipe airily: "*Adieu, messieurs.*"

And his protégée shook her head. "All a-time when honey bees run away, they make so much trouble. We very busy, messieurs!"

Clell came back to her suddenly and took her hands: "Ah, but Mademoiselle Laure, it is going to be lonesome here—very; and could I come to

see you sometime? Even if I am, you know—a—Yankee, and a robber—and all that sort of thing?"

He was eager and like his old self of the years gone, and my heart stirred to see them laughing together. The girl was confused by him a bit, and then blithe with new adventure.

"M'sieu, you may. Only please, not here at John-the-Fool." She looked curiously at the Baron de Vedrinnes who listened like a fond Newfoundland to his mistress' voice: "But around my island where the lilies are, and the shell beaches and the oaks of the *cheniere*. Oh, there I might show you many things. And M'sieu le Doctor, also."

She had no word for Virgil. He waited gravely at the launch's engine, and when we were in, sent it out of the forest cove into the hot glitter of the salt marsh without word. It must have been two miles down that monotonous ditch that we came to the black dredge that filled the end. We ran alongside past the red quarter-boat that had housed the crew. A tall man came out of the cavernous depths from the engines, wiping his hands, and of Clell and me he took not the smallest notice. His steady eyes were on the land boss.

"Well, they got another. Hogjaw took to the swamp."

The Texan's level glance went to the boiler-room.  
"Who's firin'?"

"Nobody. Brinton went out with a fever. Weed broke his arm last Tuesday. And now, Hogjaw—he was my last nigger."

There was a silence. And again I seemed to vision the specter of failure limned out of the brassy sky above the dying land. A crow was cawing blatantly in a sunbaked and leprous cypress over the line of glistening mud; a snowy egret wheeled against the intolerable blue.

"I sent out front for some new niggers. Couldn't get one. Crump sent his warnin' out front to 'em. The voodoo sign, and then somebody fired a load of buckshot into the last bunch of niggers that we tried to get from the river. That's what got Hogjaw—somebody sent him a sign when they heard he'd come to work for the Williams outfit."

The boss of the Williams outfit regarded his engineer quizzically. "I told you to cut loose at any nigger that come near the dredge without ordehs."

"I never saw 'em. They must have sneaked out of Isle Bonne and give Hogjaw his sign. Anyhow, he blew this morning."

"Take a gun?"

"Stole your double-barrel."

"Well," Virgil turned aside irrelevantly, "this dredge has got to work. We cain't lay up a day, niggers or no niggers."

"I know. Mangy and I tried to run her this morning—us two. I put Mangy to firing, but he had to quit and cook dinner. You'd better send out front for a white fireman."

"I brought a man." The boss indicated Clell, indifferently.

The big engineer was reading my young friend with pitiless deliberation. "We can bust him in, maybe."

"We got to. I'll take the crane myself. Mangy will stick. I'll get another watchman for the pump plant—there's nothing doing there for—for a while. But this ditch"—his eye ran ahead through the dead forest to the far shine of the pathless prairie—"we'll jam her through. You'll stick, Jim?"

"You bet. Say, you know who's doing all this dirt?" Big Jim pointed back to Isle Bonne's jungle. "That bunch—the baron, and her. They got your niggers—they got 'em scared. They're going to bust you. They'll dynamite this outfit if they get a chance." He gestured again to the gray wall of the swamp isle. "They'll get you, too. That bunch is as much pirates as their great-grand-dads

ever was. They got Crump and Hogjaw and ole Doc Fortune hiding out there—and them three's some bad niggers. And for what—tell me?"

"I expaict they don't want the ditch dug. They just think they'll wear us out with trouble and make us lose our option. I reckon their lawyers know our directors were pretty ready to throw up the game, till I—I went nawth and made 'em stick."

"That isn't it. That isn't what chases our niggers away. It's the old yarns about Isle Bonne and how old Armand used to run his slave ship into this cove back here and slit their necks if he had to, to keep 'em from fallin' into the government's hands. You couldn't get one of 'em into Isle Bonne woods on a bet—they don't see nothin' but pirates and slavers and ghosts—and let me tell you who's doin' it—it's the baron."

The Texan was still silently contemplating the latest failure on the man's size job.

"Well, I cain't stop fo' no ghosts. It's costin' ninety dollehhs a day to lay up, and—" he broke off, and was looking at Clell, the white-handed and immaculate young man who had this stony hatred for him. I knew what he was thinking; he had figured his personal resources to the last precious penny—that two thousand dollars he had paid out to save

Clell's good name—for Mary's sake—had been his last gamble. And Clell did not know! Nor Mary; but I had guessed aright. I saw it in his worn eyes when they fixed on the other man's disdain of him. He stood troubledly gazing off to that pitiless sky and the floating earth, the sea beyond biding its time to leap and smite him again. Somewhere in the north there was the gabble of bonds and courts, of tricks and money-changing, but here the man stood facing the failure. Love? What word was that for him? That was something idlers chattered of.

He was looking at Clell again; then quietly, he addressed the first word to him that either had spoken directly since that night when Mary had stood by them, watching, listening, to the test. It was spoken as if the thing had never been.

“I thought, when I brought you down—they'd be a clerk's job holdin' time on the men.”

“I don't want a clerk's job.”

“Seh?”

Clell motioned to the bottomless pools that lay between us and the forest fringe at John-the-Fool.  
“I didn't come for that. I want what men do—and alone.”

"The swamp?"

"Yes."

"The sun—you ain't used to it."

"I'll get used to it. I want"—he stopped and looked into the silence—"that's what I came for—the smash of things—and to win free."

The Texan pondered. "White-handed jobs are pretty well cleaned out. Had a dynamite crew ahead in the timbeh, but it's gone. The' ain't any pay-roll no mo'. They ain't any watchman no mo'. They ain't anything no mo' except Big Jim and me and the cook. Redfield, the' ain't much fo' you—I tell you you are free to go if you want. Back—this ain't you' world—it's comin' rough and hard fo' Jim and me—"

"I want it rough and hard."

He looked the city man over patiently. "All right. You can go on the crane. Big Jim is the runner. I don't know about the firin'—we'll break Mangy in on the oil, I expaict. We'll drive that machine, by Mighty—fou'teen hours a day! And the heat and noise."

"Yes," the other man answered briefly. "But there's one thing."

"Seh?"

"I'll work with you, and eat with you, and fight it out—but I will not speak to you until that debt is paid."

The Texan looked with shrewd care into that white calm face before him. The two were nearly equal, but the older man was the heavier, stringier, tougher; the short-grass country and the sea lands both seemed to have knit into him something of their fiber. I saw one gleam of resentment; then saw it die. "All right, Redfield. You make good, rememb' beh. That dredge—it's what I'm bankin' on now—I'm fightin' in the last ditch now. I reckon you could make or break me, somehow. It ain't company's money—they told me to quit. But I'm holdin' to the option—and that means the ditch clean to salt water by Septembeh. You understand?"

The younger man nodded curtly. Big Jim was watching with hard eyes. The boss went on slowly:

"We'll show you yo' work. Beyond that—nothin', if you don't want a word from me. I'm standin' fo' you fo' the sake of Mary. Yo' cain't insult me—fo' the sake of Mary. You owe me two thousand dollehs, and yo'll pay it at one hundred and fifty a month. Is that square?"

Again the other nodded. The Texan turned to me and his serene smile came. "But, Doctor Dick,

I don't know what to do with you. Neve' thought I'd come south and find things shot to pieces so. Thought we'd have a camp—a decent camp fo' a white man. Well, I reckon, somehow, I can shoul-deh you, too."

Then he turned forward on his beloved black monster: "Come on, Redfield. To-day we start her —by Mighty! We start—the three of us—and the ditch goes through."

Big Jim followed them watching. Mangy, the cook, stuck his black head through the kitchen door, staring after the boss. The silence was intolerable. I looked at the white limbs of the dead cypress, their funeral plumes of gray unstirred in the hot morning. The changeless sheen of the floating prairie was like a cat's back, sleek, treacherous as the stare of the sky. It was the place to stage a hate for the souls of men.

## CHAPTER V.

### THE HONEY HUNTERS

THE dredge worked monotonously, but with many stoppings all that forenoon. After a silent dinner in the quarter-boat, Virgil came to me with that old enigmatic gesture of his long forefinger as if he were ever trying to hook his troubles away from before his eyes.

“Doctor Dick, I got a scheme.”

I smoked on complacently, hiding the outrage within me. The cooking had been abominable, the heat and silence a menace, then the noise of the machine nerve-racking; and there was no escape.

“It’s going to be pretty low down on you, Doctor Dick. This man, Redfield”—no longer was he Clell to the Texan—“he’s got to shag with the bunch—and God help him if he breaks!”

“He’ll never break.”

The boss looked long at me. “You think so, seh?”

“I know the stuff in him—and his dad before him.”

"I ain't sayin'. I'll give him a square shift—and nothin' else. I'm through. I give up Mary fo' him; and now, damn him, I'll make him fo' her! I'm through thinkin' of this—I—" he looked off at the dim blue wall of Isle Bonne woods: "well, I cain't have this on my mind. I'm on the job. So's Big Jim. So's Redfield. So's the cook. Redfield is no better man to me than Mangy. I'm just leavin' it to you that I don't love him. I—tried, but—" he looked at me with his droll, patient smile. "Well, it's a two-man game between him and me—he can hate me all he pleases—but I want this work to go on. If he don't break under it, he's a man—and I'll tell Mary so!"

"If Mary only knew how the thing stood; but God bless her, she doesn't. She doesn't dream it's half so—so horrible!"

He smiled again gently. "Remembeh—I tried to love him—and he wouldn't let me!"

He was going back to the fire room where the new man stood waiting, and then turned to me. "Forgot my scheme fo' you. There isn't any place for you here, Doctor Dick; the grub and the bunks ain't all a gentleman and a philosopher like you would hanker fo'. I'm goin' to unload you on the baron."

"What?" I exclaimed.

"The old son-of-a-gun asked you to stay a year."

"But that's just his extravagant way of putting it."

"We'll call his bluff. Besides—" his thumb went over his shoulder to the forest: "maybe you can find out what's happenin' to my niggers so curiously. And honey bees—" he added, and a high fond light went to his eyes. "You'd make a plumb fine detective."

I regarded him unseriously: "Virgil, do you mean I'm to ask that old derelict to put me up in his camp?"

"Exactly. Don't ask him, though. Go and mooch in on him pleasantly and don't eve' say how long you may remain. He cain't kick—it's a custom of the country."

"Well," I said, and then I thought of our wood saint. "I'll go down and look about. It can't do any harm to ask about honey bees."

He smiled and passed on to his work. I left them, paddling the cook's johnboat back the mile of canal to the glade of the flooded forest where hung the baron's aerial roost. Where the first overhanging gloom of the cypress shut out the sun, I became entangled in the palmetto scrub and had

to détour about the trees so that I came in behind the camp. Here the semi-twilight reigned, not a ray of sun reached to the black water through the tangled tops. Down the watery aisle wandered a breath, cold, evil-odored, malignant, and in it, like streamers of sea plants, the moss plumes swayed, but without sound, within the deeps.

The platform camp was untenanted. I could see quite through under the palm thatch, for the baronial hall had no doors whatever. The baronial mosquito bar streamed fitfully in the breeze, from the four-poster bed.

"That old monk of a baron is not in it, though," I mused. "Yet where could he go? He couldn't paddle a swamp pirogue—it would be absurd. There's not room for him between the trees here-about!"

The huge mud chimney of the shack was directly in front of me. I was noticing its clever construction, the clay, shells and palm withes bound about with bamboo brier; when, on its near side I saw a scrap of paper. It was stuck over a thorn of the brier vine and I could almost make out the writing. Then I did—with my glasses.

It read merely: "We got another one this morning."

A firm upright hand, with nothing of the sloven about it. I was surprised. Then it occured to me to make a closer study. I reached my hand up over the first rough support of the chimney base for that paper, and as I did so there came the crash of a shot so startlingly near that I all but tipped clumsily from the boat. And down past my arm writhed the ugliest black moccasin I had yet seen—down beside the gunwale into the water, where he twisted to his death. I was staring and sniffing the powder of that shot, when a voice spoke pleasantly from the latanier jungle behind.

“I was just passing this way.” The murmur was languorous. Then I turned to see our saint of Isle Bonne. She stole across the black water in her light green pirogue—twelve feet long it was, and so delicately hewn that it oscillated like a compass needle as she sat it. Across the forethwart lay a very modern automatic rifle.

“Congo snakes are very bad for Yankee fel-los,” she drawled on amiably.

“Mademoiselle, you saved my life!”

Her laughter followed—but her eyes were on that chimney note.

Then their covert glance went to me. Yankee fel-los were as amusing as ever, even if they were

caught reading other people's correspondence. I somehow grew resentful. Did she shoot at that snake, or my guilty fingers? She had potted that reptile squarely through its ugly head! Now, as easily, she drifted to my clumsy craft, her chin set on one brown hand, watching my discomfiture.

"Is it"—I inquired with dignity at length—"a good day for honey bees?"

"Some, truly, messieur. Big bees for honey, but little bees for stinging."

"Young woman," I retorted, "what were you doing behind me?"

"Oh, I was watching you, m'sieu. All a-time, you come down the canal and turn off in our glade I say: 'What a-matter with that Yankee fel-lo?'"

I was exasperated; she had seen me squirming about to read that missive. And she had written it, without a doubt; and had left it there, only to return when she discovered me.

"That infernal snake," I murmured: "It quite upset me. Where's the baron? Do you suppose he has any brandy?"

"Oh, *oui!*" With one long swift whirl of the paddle she shot her light craft to the platform; was up on it and in the shack, ere I had managed to teeter to the piling and climb out. She was ex-

tending a flask to me—an exquisite but tarnished thing of silver. I noted a coat-of-arms and a date: 1780. She was noticing interestedly my look upon that relic.

“Thank you,” I said dryly, and reached over the platform to fetch up my suit-case. She looked at me still more interestedly.

“You going back out front, m’sieu?”

“No. I—” and I placidly opened the case and took out my last cigar. “I have come to accept the baron’s invitation.”

“Invitation, m’sieu?”

“You heard him, this morning, most enthusiastically insist that I stay a year!”

“But, m’sieu!”

“I have come to put up with my good friend, the baron.”

“But *m’sieu! Mon Dicu, Seigneur! M’sieu!*”

“Ah, it is good of him.” I chuckled and repressed it. The saint was wide-eyed, furious, incredulous. I had her going! She stepped closer, her clean-cut, ingenuous face changing to utter dismay. I went on felicitously: “Ah, me. There was no room on the dredge. It’s beastly at best. No clean water—no soap that I could see. And dirt

and cinders and noise. I thought then of my good friend, the Baron, and his kind invitation. I said:

“‘Ah, how kind, indeed—how princely!’ Truly, a nobleman, mademoiselle, offering, as if it were his ancestral castle, this humble abode.” I made a gesture and cracked my knuckles on the rooftree of the abode. “Ah, mademoiselle, I thank you, also for your efforts. You are magnificent—doubtless, you will stay and cook for us.”

“*Le nom de diable!* Cook?” She turned and ran frightenedly to the side of the shack and stared off in the flooded forest. Then she ran back and clapped her hands. Actually she was pale! I seized those small hands of hers, brown, firm, exquisitely molded and strong as steel. She tried to wring them in my grasp; she had apparently forgotten every word of English. Then she gasped again:

“Ah, no—no—no!”

“Most excellent!” I roared. “Ah, that splendid gentleman, my friend, Baron de Vedrinnes. How fortunate that I can accept.”

“*Non—non! Diable!*” Then she broke away and paced the platform.

“M’sieu—the Congo snakes!”

“Ah, here is mademoiselle to shoot them!”

"The fever."

"I am proprietor of a famous remedy myself—and shall a physician fear his own dose?"

She looked at me as she might a lunatic. "The old pirate folkses!"

"Who?"

"Pirates, messieur!"

"They are most excellently dead, mademoiselle. I saw the graves of Dominick You and Beluche in your old New Orleans cemetery. And as for Lafitte, himself—the devil alone knows what became of him, but he has been gone close to a century."

Then she suddenly stopped and made a *moue*. I went on placidly again. "I am not a swamp negro, mademoiselle, to be scared out of Barataria woods by any ghost tales of Lafitte's men. What, by the way, have you done with Hogjaw—the one you got this morning?"

She was absolutely dumfounded. "You've scared, or coaxed or waylaid every nigger Mr. Williams has ever been able to bring down in this infernal place of pirate yarns and buried treasure fakes."

She looked demurely at me. "You are a wise man, Doctor Rainey."

"Wait," I boasted, "until you know me. Mean-

time, I am here. I haven't a roof over me, nor an ounce of provisions; and Messieur le Baron has courteously offered me his home. See here," I turned on her like an inquisitor of police: "if you offer to obstruct this plan, I'll go tell Mr. Williams all I *do* know."

She gave me a quick appreciation. I had her there. What did I know? She was cudgeling her brains to fathom it; and I cunningly ceased to argue and fell to unpacking my stuff.

The baron's shack had two bedrooms and a combined hall and kitchen, and in the best of the crazy chambers I went, tumbling all sorts of litter out on the floor, arranging my toilet articles on the pine table and hung up my good suit. Then I sat down, pulled out a magazine and proceeded to read.

Out on the platform the wood saint sat and watched me with long sighs and furtive glances. She was thoroughly jarred, that I knew. I totally disregarded her.

Finally she spoke and with a plaintiveness that actually seemed humble.

"Messieur, did you know that my great-granduncle was Armand Drouillot?"

"Yes."

"And Isle Bonne was his?"

"Yes. And a most awful ancestor you had, mademoiselle. He was a gambler, a smuggler, a slave-runner, and he lost his life most rightfully at the yard-arm of an English sloop-of-war in 1854."

"Ah, you know so much!" she sighed.

"Quite so. And his father was Placide Drouillet of whom it is said that even Jean Lafitte congratulated himself when he was killed at the battle of Chalmette. You are a most awful lot, mademoiselle."

She sighed again. "Papa Prosper, he no so much. He stay at home on his gallerie and reads his N'Awlyins paper if he eve' get one."

"I know. And scolds his tree-frog. He is a gentleman."

"Me, I don't like gentleman like that, m'sieu. I like them like Messieur le Baron. Ah, he jump up—so! Swing his sword so—or his pipe! Ah, for a lady he do anything!"

"He can't do much. He's too fat."

She looked at me injuredly. "He no so fat."

"Fat and eighty-eight. He ought to know better than stick a rooster feather in his hat, and addle your head with romance. I'll wager now, he's got you hunting buried treasure. Money—not honey, you understand?"

She made another face at me—and then broke to laughter. “Oh, you so a wise man, m’sieu! I like you. I let you go hunt treasure.”

“Thank you. By next autumn Isle Bonne and its treasure and its ghosts, snakes, pirates, red bugs and bull bats will belong to the Prairie Meadows Development Company, and in five years more Yankee farmers will be raising corn and sorghum inside Mr. Williams’ protection levee, and where will you be?”

She thought about it. “I don’t know, m’sieu. Maybe Antoine come back and be a barbeh sometime.”

“Marry him. A good honest barber who doesn’t scrape one’s face, and will bring home his wages every Saturday night. You marry Antoine, and help him be an excellent barber.”

“Messieur le Baron, he says barbehs no so much. He says dukes are much better for marrying, m’sieu. Only I never saw any.”

“And you should not. One nobleman is enough for Isle Bonne. And why does he wear the rooster feather?”

“Because we couldn’t find any peacocks.”

“Oh, lord!” I groaned. “Is that he coming now—being towed along by Allesjandro?”

She jumped up with delight. Out of the jungle across the glade came a procession. Allesjandro paddling his pirogue and towing behind in a square-end swamp batteau the vast and rotund form of his Highness. With many jabberings on the pilot's part, and grunts on the baron's when they bumped the cypress spikes, the flotilla reached the platform ladder. They had a deal of trouble getting the baron up. Up above Laure pulled; down below Allesjandro heaved, and in chorus with them both the Baron de Vedrinnes recited prayers of his reviled Capuchin.

"Ho, my buttons!" he gasped. "Name of God, I am twisted! Ah! Ah, my foot, Allesjandro—you are breaking it. Ah, together, now—up—ho!"

He sat on the platform comically apoplectic, and waved his hand at Laure, not seeing me at all.

"Ah, princess, there is no more romance left to the world! I have tried fifty years to conserve the last of it—but I am getting fat!"

"Getting fat?" she inquired, innocently. "Monsieur le Baron, you have been at Isle Bonne four years now, and always it has required two of us to get you on the platform. But what has that to do with it?"

"Nothing—nothing at all, my dear." He rolled



Laure pulled, Allesjandro heaved



to his feet and wiped his face. Allesjandro, with a jabber of his swamp patois, was paddling off again. The master waved to him. "See that the men eat, Allesjandro—we had trouble enough to get them. And if they steal a pig, anywhere—*voilà!* You are not to notice such an unfortunate occurrence. A chop, in fact, here at our castle—ah, well, mademoiselle, did you happen to bring anything from that old dodderer, your grandfather?"

The saint's face grew stony. "A little duck, m'sieu—baked as you like it—seventeen minutes."

"A little duck—rarely baked, but wholly illegal in April. Well, well—with these Yankees around you'd best have a care."

"M'sieu! The doctor!" She whirled him about to me, scarlet-faced.

The baron gazed; the wrinkled purses under his eyes tightened—and then his grand bow, with the wide sweep of the long pipe, followed.

"My friend, the doctor! Ah, to dinner, indeed, on mademoiselle's exquisite illegal duck. It is magnificent that you came. After all what is a duck between friends?"

"An excellent dinner, messieur." I out-bowed him grandly. "I am pleased to accept."

"To dinner—ah, no—to stay the week, a month, —a year. Our home is yours—everything—" he swept an arm to it—the thatch, the mud chimney, the strings of garlic and mink skins and dried bait hanging to the rooftree; "I am honored!"

Laure was shaking his arm: "*Non—non!*" she was dragging him to his threshold. "See—see!" she gasped. "The doctor!"

His eye fell upon my luggage spread about the bed, the open case and my toilet articles upon his little table before the mirror. His interest was profound.

"I am happy to accept," I hastened on. "Mademoiselle welcomed me to the best room—it is too good of you. My heart"—I placed a hand upon it—"is full. Time alone will show my gratitude."

The look the wood saint gave me should have withered one. The baron was bowing gravely. "Ah, my good friend, the doctor!"

"Ah, Baron!" I all but wept. Laure's eyes had an angry glitter. The baron cocked one of his wide; the other was full of smoke. "There was no room for me at the dredge. They were crowded—and then I happened to think of your invitation of this morning."

"What happy chance! A man of the world—of

thought, of feeling, of culture—and who, I trust, is not afraid of snakes and red bugs."

"Not in the least." I seated myself calmly in my chair. "Ah, I wonder now, would mademoiselle mind serving her excellent and illegal duck? I feel hungry."

They both stared, and a trifle bewilderedly. Rebellion was in her eyes. The baron waved his pipe. "My man, Allesjandro—well, well, mademoiselle would not mind laying the cloth. And a jug of wine—I procure excellent wine of Hungary ordered by way of the Grand Isle mail-boat, messieur."

He seated himself thoughtfully. Laure went in the main hall and was busied. The way she flirted the baron's gay red tablecloth over the board and rattled the dishes in his screened cupboard was a revelation. She was mad. The baron was jarred. I had put a bad crimp in some scheme or other. The baron was still in his study. Get rid of me he evidently must. He rubbed his hand slowly across the greasy silk sash about his paunch and sighed. The poignant stillness of the deep swamp reigned. The open glade of the flooded forest held spectral depths from the black shadows. Already the immense gloom of night was on us here. The only sunlight lay on the masses of the moss plumes

opposite us across the water, and in the town of that still air it was spun to gold flickings. Somewhere above me a water-drop fell from the giant cypress and struck the pools at its feet with a tinkle of elfin music. That was all in that fantastic place of silence and of colorful shades—it was as unreal as a stage-set; and life was muted that the mummers might speak.

The baron heaved about in his vast chair. He was knighthood gone to seed. Anywhere else he would have been ridiculous; here, he seemed quite the proper lord. He seemed to feel the need of explanation to a modern worldling.

And then he sighed: “Eh, messieur, one must live.”

“What with oysters, crabs and shrimp and fish for the taking anywhere in your bay, a deer to pot in the *cheniere*, now and then—and perchance a neighbor’s pig—I should think one would live well.”

“I did not mean that,” he added: “That is nothing.” He slapped his girth. “I am through with that—my stomach has brought me through famously. But ah, messieur, that is not to live! The fine flower—” he snapped his fingers to the air. “Exquisite feeling, and the play of grace; a song and the chance of adventure. A service and

a love—one must have that to live. Look at me—it has kept me alive fifteen years beyond my time. The eternal pursuit and the delight of just tipping with your fingers the ineffable mysteries—affairs, women, the chance of a sword thrust. Messieur, at twenty-four I was the best swordsman in the Moravian Cuirassiers. At thirty the best pistol-shot in the Crimean regiments of the Czar; at forty the best gun captain in your Confederate privateering service. I have been shot, hanged, drowned, burned, buried, by the official records of half a dozen governments, but now look at me—eighty-eight,—” he cocked his head so that the rooster feather in his green hat hung over one eye—*“Sans peur et sans reproche.”*

“Sans a bath, I fancy,” I murmured, but he but saw my lips move. Then I shifted squarely about on him: “Come—come—what are you up to?”

He shrugged. “I tumbled about the mewling affairs of five or six of your Latin American republics for thirty years. There was not much in it save a woman now and then, who appreciated me—who could interpret a bow after the manner, who caught the merest phrase I could offer—to whom one could give service, in fact. Now and then one who saw me with her mind’s eye in a background

of old rose and mahogany and not a dirty plunderer from the seven seas. But that is passed—at times since then I've had to wash my own shirt—my shirt, messieur—not *the* shirts. But here I have come back to the south coast where—” He broke off and looked strangely out of his forest glade to the far gulf reefs: “It is at least sixty years since here-about I just escaped being hanged.”

“Still,” I pursued, “why here again? What has Barataria to offer—your slavers and privateers have been gone three-quarters of a century.”

“Ah, what should it be! Here, at the end of the rainbow I stumbled upon it.”

“The pot of gold?”

“Banal! No—never! What would that be to me—at eighty-eight? No, I told you the exquisite thing for a gentleman—a service and a love.”

“What? *What?*” I stared at him. The wood saint within was tinkling the glasses.

“No—no! For shame, Doctor! But I came upon them—my man, Allesjandro, first apprised me that one of the old Drouillot line held to Isle Bonne. And then I came—we camped a week with that insufferable old bourgeois, Prosper. Ah, there is a come-down, let me tell you, from Armand Drouillot of our old free companions; from Placide, the pir-

ate, who fought with Jackson at Chalmette, from Gaspard Bouligny de Drouillot who was granted lands hereabout extending from the river to the sea for the aid he gave Bernardo de Galvez, the fourth Spanish viceroy of Louisiana, in capturing Mobile from the English—ah, from that chevalier they have degenerated to Prosper, the crab-fisher! And here I discover the last of the Louisiana line, my lady, cooped up with this doddering *grandpere* who sits stirring his coffee like a damned cajun while the Yankees plunder her island! Infamous! I said—intolerable! To me—I, who, with my own eyes, have seen the signature of Charles the Third of Spain to the warrants that gave the lands to the first chevalier! At once I saw what I must do—old life and loves and fighting poured back through my veins. We built our camp here on what was left of *Cheniere* John-the-Fool, and when I found, as the final ignominy of Prosper, that he was trying to marry his grandchild to a barber, I straightway challenged him. But he had nothing save his infernal crab-hook to fight me with, and besides he looked in a book from your Washington government, and decided the law would not allow him to fight. Law—bah! All I could do was to sit here and try to charm my marquise away from him and his in-

fluence. I must build her anew, teach her the French of courts, and not this abominable patois of the south coast. She can speak French or English well enough save when she is excited, as you may have observed, and then she will make you tear your hair. Her mind and her manners—ah, I have done marvels with her in the four years I have cajoled her. Barber be damned—I will slit his throat, I will burn old Prosper out and sack his house before she shall wed a barber. A fortune, that is what we need. I would show her courts and promenades—she should hear the phrases of gallants, and laugh at the loveliness of silks and laces. She is beautiful! Ah, if I had my youth again.”

From the palmetto thatch he drew some soiled old wrappings and from these he unrolled a scabbard and then a sword of wondrous art. It was rarely old, and sprung like a line of light in his fingers. He came to sit again and caressed the frayed tassels thoughtfully. “I’ve swum five times from sinking ships with this, have buried it six to keep it from captors. When I come to die, messieur, I hope to have strength to throw it from me into clean green water of the open sea.”

“Messieur le Baron,” I put in, “I took you this morning for an abominable fraud! I apologize.”

He waved his pipe: "I appreciated you at once, Doctor!"

"But, ah me! You're fighting a big land company as well as a barber to retrieve the fortunes of your lady. That honorable blade of yours, you can not well stick it into an entire board of directors in New York."

He flourished it grandly. "No matter! It is to live nobly, whatever the end of fortune. The greatest fighters are the greatest losers. And as for the barber"—he wiped his sword across his rusty trousers—"I would not pollute this with his cajun hide; but I will order my men to stick him head-first in the mud if he ever comes back. And Laure—I have all but shattered his memory in her mind. Ah, Doctor, there is a noble cause here for you to aid!"

Now, I had lost some of my assurance. You could not help liking the old pig-sticker. Two good legs under him and seven inches off his belly, and I could well imagine him charging Virgil's clam-shell dredge like a very Quixote.

He was eying me shrewdly; he had quite forgotten my position here in his burst of comradeship. With all his airs, there he was—the boy, the hero to himself, simple, eager,—a flower, a phrase,

a kindness, a sacrifice, a cause—jubilantly he arose to them.

“I had indeed forgotten,” he went on, “you are a part of this diabolic scheme to dispossess Prosper and his grandchild—to dig a ditch through the heart of our wondrous forest. Still, you are a man unlike that fellow of the dredge—he is a hard nut to crack.”

“He offered her a compromise four years ago.”

“Bah!—forty thousand dollars for a principality. I protest—no, no—never! I broke that up at once. The Bordeaux heirs got the titles because of some unrecorded transfer sixty years ago—the real warrants from Don Galvez were missing. That alone is what beats us”—he roared, and waved his toledo blade southward at the film of smoke rising from the Texan’s dredge. “And that fellow—why, my wild-woods marquise does not so much as notice the mud grubber!”

“A pity!” I murmured. “It would profit her well.”

The roaring knight smote his breast. “Bah—I! Me! I will stick him into one of his own mud-holes! I treat him civilly now, but when the time comes—” he broke off and winked at me with vast cunning: “I am not at my last trick, by any means, good Doctor.”

I smiled guilelessly. He went fuming on with a flourish of his sword now and then, and a pull at his pipe. "*Name of God!* They are a rabble here—shrimp-haulers, crab-fishers—catchers of muskrats along with the riffraff from New Orleans levees. And the Yankee newcomers are no better—money-chasers and dirt grubbers, without manners or understanding. Ah, if I could find one proper lover for my marquise! She must be polished by contact with the bright world. Everything in her is sweetly rough, a fine wild grace of nature, but we must build more in her. I—me! I am the juggler of fortune for her." He rubbed his pink poll under the rooster feathers. "I am the master craftsman—but she needs a lover—a dozen lovers—to open the hidden flower." Then he smote his knee: "Ah, I have it. Doctor, you are well preserved, and have a speech of the world—you must play the lover for her. *Name of God!*—you are right to my hand!"

"The devil!" I roared. "I will not!"

"It"—he went on, amiably, as if it were settled—"will be part of her education. Nothing will so complete her as the love of a man of culture and discrimination. After you—others, of course. But, Doctor, you are the best I have now, at hand."

"I shall not serve as a stalking horse for any man's passion."

"You decline to love her?"

"Yes—never!"

"Then," he went on evenly, "you must expect a challenge from me."

"Get out! You are absurd. And you are twice my age."

"Exactly. That gives you a valid excuse for refusing to fight me. That and the fact you have no weapons or knowledge of them. But it leaves my honor untarnished. I can write of it to the Austrian consul, my good friend. He will see that it gets, by way of gossip, to what is left of my family in Europe. The Prince of Thurn will say: 'What, that old firebrand, Bernal? Still alive and dueling?'"

"Baron, I have seen a great many vain men in my time—"

"But none like me. Ah, that is what keeps the old blood singing through my heart—call it what you will! That, and the face of the beautiful world. And the memory of another face or two! Come, now—Doctor—here is our great and last adventure. You will assist me—petal by petal we shall unfold our flower, we shall watch her face turning

from the opal mists of childhood to the clear morning of a woman and her love!"

I sat back and watched the old dog in his clear sunset. Then I gasped in some bewilderment: "Well, how do we begin?"

He was arising and waddling in to his dining hall. "I leave the inner part to your own delicacy. But there are some absolute essentials first. She must have poise and manner—I have been diligently correcting much, but in her own home that vulgar Prosper corrupts as fast as I build up. But you now—convey in some fit fashion not only that you are enamored, but also that you disapprove of the way she holds her fork, or perhaps pours the tea. A lover can touch her pride where I—at times I fear she looks on me as a meddling old tutor."

We went into the larger room. The wood saint had the small table marvelously appointed, considering all. The few pieces of silver shone, there was a globe of her all eternal and omnipresent wild hyacinths in the center of the cloth, and their purple gaud hung aglitter with water-drops. The baron bowed me to a chair before his rice and crabs, lettuce and *begung* which was raw sea trout eggs, spice and vinegar, a dish that Allesjandro concocted as it was done in his own distant Mindanao.

"It is excellent," cried the baron. "Ah, mademoiselle, you have the touch that would give genius to a crust of bread! The air and the features of the nobility—"

The saint had suddenly uplifted her fork and deliberately jabbed it down through the breast of that wholly illegal duck. Slambang defiance there was in the thrust.

"Mademoiselle Laure," I began. "As to carving, would you allow me—"

She lifted that small duck smartly on her fork and brought it down across the top of my head. The gravy flew in my ears, the dressing down my neck. She jumped up and clapped her hands.

"That for you! I heard every word of it! I will never love a bald-headed doctor!"

Then she ran out. I sputtered a way out of the hot gravy. The baron looked on placidly. He reached to replace the duck from my lap.

"Damnable!" I roared.

"There was a grace to it," he answered. "It reminded me of the way her rascal of a great-granduncle insulted an English captain in the barbor of Toulon in 1841. Allow me to serve the relish, will you not? We picked for you one of the three radishes in our garden."

## CHAPTER VI

### THE WAY TO BEGIN

I PASSED an uncomfortable night. The bed was lumpy, and the eerie swish of the Spanish moss across the palm roof, the scamper of chameleons and numberless insects through the dry thatch, together with the diabolic cry of the swamp owls did not invite sleep. We had talked late, the baron relating a variety of astonishing tales. But of the lady of the duck—nothing more. He apparently considered us introduced. She had gone home without seeing us again. Allesjandro appeared in the morning and served coffee. I was smoking out on the platform when a johnboat turned out of the canal and came across our watery front yard. Clell was in it, and called to me a good morning that did my heart good.

“Doctor Dick, it was a short week—this first.”

“Of course. This must be Sunday, I remember. How did it go?”

He clambered up to me and laughed ruefully. I

caught one of the hands he had tried to conceal. "I'll get broken in pretty soon. The levers and the cable with which we work that crane are a bit rough at first."

The blood was all but starting through his palms. I nearly cried out my sympathy, and his face set to that hard sullenness that had been on it these weeks. "Now, don't, Doctor Dick. You know the compact. And I—I wouldn't have him"—he jerked his head back to the prairie—"know how it—hurt. I wiped the blood off inside my shirt when he or Big Jim came near."

And my boy smiled down at me. Somehow that first day at the man's size job had put a buoyance in him that was good to see. He made a gesture to the north. "Mary, I wonder what she'd think?"

"She'd dash about for peroxide, or cold cream in her efficient manner. She'd be—well she'd be beautifully proud."

His face darkened again. "Well, it's all off. She's free, and so am I. When I work out this slave debt to this fellow, I'll pull off somewhere in the world and have a swing for myself."

"She loves you, Clell."

"No." He laughed again. "When a woman won't give up her pretty things and take a chance on facing

the hard grind for a few years with a fellow, she doesn't love him much. Mary's read too much, and thought too much. She's a dear girl and all that—and a wonder for her type, but I—well, now I'm away, I can see everything clearly."

"But you love her, Clell."

He twisted as if an old pain had him. "I'm coming through, Doctor Dick. I'm through with women. That Williams taught me one thing. I can stand alone and upright and face him. As good a man as he. As strong as he. I hate him—and I want him to feel it. He does feel it—but his hands are tied. When this debt is paid I'll tell him to his face—a good many things; he'll have to be a man to stand for it." He laughed again but bitterly. I tried to gage that monstrosity that had come to the soul of my sunny-hearted lad of a few years ago. Hate? There was no room for it in Clell, but there it stood between the two.

He suddenly gripped my shoulders with his torn palms. "Old Dick, you ought not to be mixed in it. But God bless you! I might have killed him, if you hadn't. The way Mary looked at me. You know I wasn't dishonest. I lost my sister's little fortune trying to start an electrical business up in the state with Fred Hite. It was all for Mary—

but she never knew. When I lost and was cornered, Mary didn't seem to sympathize—she merely looked at it with her clear business practicality—and then came Williams and his money."

I nodded. "But if you hadn't been so high-headed. Boy, if you'd have let me pay that miserable two thousand back to him, you'd have been free."

"That isn't the point. He smiled—and looked at Mary, as much as to say I wasn't equal to paying him. As to your paying, dear Dick, you're not so rich yourself that you can spend money foolishly."

"I have worked too hard for my money to tolerate any suggestion that I may not spend it foolishly if I choose. You and Mary always scolded me about spending my money." I spoke testily. These young people were always condescending to me—there was Laure and her duck.

Clell was poking about the platform. "How did you get on with the old chap?"

"Well enough. I have had my coffee and so has he. Then his man Friday went off again, and the baron, having called for a jug of his Hungarian wine, rolled over and went to sleep again. He snored just now."

"There's something rather funny about all this work. Yesterday, from the dredge I looked off to

the Isle Bonne forest and in an old dead tree, away off, I know I saw a man watching us. And Mangy, the cook, saw him too. He muttered and rolled his eyes, but I noticed he said nothing to Williams or Big Jim. He just nodded to me and muttered: 'Dem old pirate folkses.' And Mangy's so absent-minded that he's an atrocious cook. How did you get on here for dinner?"

"Duck," I responded, absently smelling of my collar: "With gravy—rather hot."

"And the princess—was she here?"

"She served the duck and then put off."

"Gee!" he retorted: "There's some girl! She got me, Doctor Dick—big! I'm tired of Mary's crowd—they're super-civilized. Bright and clever, but they can't love any more. Too cool, and looking for the main chance. I'm tired of cleverness. It isn't the fashion to lead simple contented lives any more. If a man said he was really contented and happy, people'd say he was a quitter. The women of Mary's crowd look on their husbands as sort of good old work-dogs that they're fond of, after a fashion—as they would be of any useful animal that didn't take up too much of their time. They give him sort of a companionship—that's the essence of their modernity. And I'm glad I see it now—

that I turned back. I want something primal where women have passion and the flash of savagery, and give all recklessly and demand all."

"The duck season," I put in irrelevantly, "is closed by law now. I wish there was a closed season on women—women with a flash of savagery. Hear the baron snore—it's big and primal."

"There you go, Doctor Dick, funning away about real things as if they didn't matter. If Williams was blotted out, I'd enjoy all this." And he clenched those bruised hands of his—and winced.

I faced about on him squarely. "See here, don't go to talking all this fantastic idealism to the baron. He'll have you for Number Two!"

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"Never mind. As for women, much as I love Mary, I can not quite reconcile myself to them. The notion that they have anything to do with happiness is absurd. Happiness is solely a thing of one's soul. Women are never fair to their enemies nor absolutely generous to their friends—they play with an ace up their sleeve. They marry for a variety of reasons of which love is the fifth or sixth."

He denounced me with the inevitable intolerance of the optimist. He had not yet had his duck. I

saw between Clell, in his new if confused ardor, and the baron with his musty chivalry, a bachelor would have a hard time to keep his pipe sweet. And that Creole girl would come back—I hoped it would not be a tureen of soup the next time.

We smoked and idled lazily. The sun swung about the shadows of the baron's pool. The beauty of that morning I can not tell you. The arching and tenebrous silence, the warm sweet twilight, a tawny velvet which the sun could not quite dispel.

The noon was near, and its somnolence was on us, when I heard a grating under the platform. Then above it arose Laure's head. Her small and exquisite ear was so close I might have touched it, and her dark eyes widened. She evidently was startled to see me, thinking I must have departed in a huff. As she climbed up she nodded tartly. Then at sight of Clell, her sparkle came. She held both hands to him.

"Ah, m'sieu! So, already, you come to see me. It is good—you have not forgotten."

"I couldn't forget the honey bees—and you. I was intending to try to get through the swamp this afternoon to call at Papa Prosper's."

She felt real alarm. "Don't you eve' try that. A Yankee fel-lo! The deep swamp, m'sieu"—she

looked about—“this is nothing to it! This little *cheniere* on this side Isle Bonne they call John-the-Fool.”

“Excellently named,” I murmured, and she disregarded me.

“Don’t you eve’ go no farther than John-the Fool. You can always see me here. Always I come to see if Allesjandro feed the baron as he should. And talk. At Papa Prosper’s—ah, well! The talk is mostly crabs and seed catalogue. Here we talk about dukes.”

“Dukes and ducks,” I murmured again, and she shrugged. I refused to be ignored, even if these two young persons already had no use for anything but each other.

Then I heard the baron bawling from his bed. Within one saw the bar over his blankets convulsing. Then the hank of his pipe came out. From under the bunk crawled the spike-tailed pup. The upheaval of the clothing continued; the baron’s foot stuck out.

“Mademoiselle, is that you? Ah, I heard that voice! I see the sun—mademoiselle, will you put the garden out in its sunshine?”

“Oh, *oui!*” She broke away from Clell. And then, about the corner of the camp she reappeared

trundling a wheelbarrow. On it was a sort of box. The teetering load was almost too much, and Clell hastened.

“*Merci!*” she said, with exasperating prettiness, and left it to him. But from the baron’s bar came a volley of objurgation:

“*Le nom de Dieu!* Marquise, the Yankee will spill it! Ah, our garden! To the rescue, mademoiselle! From his clumsy hands—rescue!”

Out he rolled in his red robe-de-nuit. His shock of white hair stood every way, his porpoise body jellied as he strode.

Clell was parading the wheelbarrow lucklessly here and there.

“Here, messieur! In the sunshine—here!” She pointed to the only bar of the sunlight that fell through John-the-Fool’s high-arching canopy. Clell chased it wildly and engineered the garden there.

The baron was following. “Ah, young man, careful!” He stopped, wheezing over the barrow. In the slab box, perhaps three feet by three, filled with rich mold was a valiant array of lettuce, onions, radishes and a lone cucumber vine. Bravely they looked up to the sunshine. Proudly down gazed the baron. He patted the lustiest radish of the three.

"Pardon, messieur, but I could not trust you—you can not realize that this is the only sweet earth on this side the swamp. At what labor we brought it through from Isle Bonne! And the sun?—*le diable!* Such a morsel as we get here. All the time one must chase it—after two o'clock there is none whatever!"

"It will have most two hours more, Messieur le Baron. Ah, the cucumber—one can hear it cry with joy!" Laure fondled it lovingly. Clell watched that small hand. What affection to place on a cucumber!

The baron went back to his dressing. He put on his green cap of the feather and lighted his pipe before he drew the curtains. Then I heard his phonograph rustily clawing out a duo of *Rigoletto*, and his rattly old voice following, as he searched for his socks.

Laure and Clell were inspecting the garden. "You are sitting exact in our best sunshine, Doctor!" she exclaimed, and that was the first recognition of me. I moved over humbly. "Now move our garden into its sunshine, M'sieu Redfield. The little sweet earth! It is a treasure. We must watch that dog—he all a-time steals the sunshine from our garden."

The reproved pup gazed from afar. Certainly he would like to lie in that sunshine. We had both lost the light of her pleasure.

Then we were asked in to breakfast. Allesjandro was still gone mysteriously, but the baron explained, although we had had our early coffee, more coffee would do excellently for *dejeuner*.

Clell glanced up at the baronial rafters. Brown they were, and hung with gay peppers, garlic beads, mink pelts, bay leaves, a rusty helmet, crab bait of dried beef sinew, and plunder of all sort. Then his eye came down again to the baron's battered but exquisite coffee urn. Laure was pouring.

"By jove!" he cried. "You can't tell how fine this is, mademoiselle,—and how you are doing it!"

"Could not I carve a duck?" she inquired: "or hold my fork so—correctly, messieur?"

"The perfection of all perfection's as it is!" he cried.

"That it the way to begin," she observed, and looked at me and then the baron. The baron looked at me with vast new doubt. I had a curious resentment at all this fine youth of the two of them. They paid no attention to us. None whatever. The baron tried to interpose some of his persiflage, and she inquired of Clell did he not love her island

more and more? Did he not despise dirty dredges that turned up the mud? *Mon Dieu!* What infamy! No gentleman would do it. I grew jealous. I was glad when there came an apoplectic gasp from the baron. He pointed out the door speechlessly.

Laure shrieked. We all started to our feet. The luckless pup had upset the garden out of its sunshine. The wood saint was in tears.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE EDUCATION OF LAURE

THE end of the following week I made the second of the reports to Mary which I had promised. I had the entire morning to myself, for Baron de Vedrinnes and his man Friday had gone into the deep swamp, and Laure had not been near us for two days. So I put things with some deliberation, and, I fear, asperity. The week had not made me more enamored of John-the-Fool.

"That, my dear," I wrote her, "is the name of the place, apparently. Although there is no longer any place. I am roosting between three trees and a lot of poles thrust into the water on which is the castle—it seems that what was left of *Cheniere* John-the Fool after the last gulf hurricane in ninety-three, is merely Congo snakes and mosquitoes and incomparable sunsets, that is, what one can see of the sun for the forest. I have a job now. It is to chase the sun with our garden which has been rehabilitated. The little radish is doing well now, but the cucumber is ailing. I mentioned Baron John Bernal de Vedrinnes; he is much worried about the cucumber which he had planned to have in a salad on

July fourteenth, when he and Mademoiselle Drouillet will celebrate the fall of the Bastile. He does not approve of the fall but bows to her Republican instincts. I mentioned mademoiselle, did I not? She is the one who hit me with the duck.

"You ask me of Clell. My dear, things go no better with the two. I haven't much heart to stay about the dredge—it is an infernal affair, anyway, of heat and noise and dirt. But all day and half the night Virgil smashes away on his canal—the machine is far off now through the dead trees and into the *flottant* as they call the floating land. He has only got half enough men, and they are all dog-tired and grim and silent at night when I paddle to the bunk-house and try to cheer things along. And the disheartening situation between Clell and Virgil does not change. They watch each other across a gulf of hate; and the fact that Clell has never whimpered when he worked Virgil's levers with his hands dripping blood only made Williams smile. He was expecting the boy to break, and Clell has met every demand on him. He is just a trifle insolent, and I fear—oh, my dear! I am afraid for them! The only time Clell is himself is when he comes over here to this ridiculous boarding-house of mine—then you ought to see him change. That Creole girl of Isle Bonne interests him—he's like the old Clell of five years ago when he's with us. She comes of a scandalous line of pirates and privateers, and now and then it shows plain enough. Big Jim, the day engineman, says she would not hesitate to dynamite the dredge to ruin Mr. Williams, if they ever gave her the chance. She says so herself. I can't understand Virgil saying once he loved her. I told Clell of it, and the

way he smiled was not good. The two of them seem to run to a clash everywhere. It is a sad mess. Virgil's men have not been paid for weeks, and only loyalty to him holds them here—he's about given up the hope of aid from the company to finish his ditch and if anything happens now he's wiped out. And the baron chuckles, and Laure shrugs and smiles. I do believe she is trying to win Clell away from Virgil's job—that's why she coquets with him so outrageously. She treats me vilely.

"Oh, Mary, I wish this abominable thing had never happened!"

"Old Dick still loves you."

Our mail goes out by means of a pirogue runner, usually, to catch the Barataria mail-boat which runs down to the south coast every week, so getting a letter from Isle Bonne to New York is less certain in time than getting one to St. Petersburg. But Mary wrote me at once.

Very brief it was; I recall that she concluded with a curious loneliness for one of her busy and ever oncoming life.

But she began:

"What in the world do you mean about the little radish? I think that sun has affected you——What sort of an appearing person is this Mademoiselle Laure Drouillot? You have spoken twice of her very mysteriously. I'm glad to hear Clell is

making good. Of course I don't expect him to write to me—the breach between us was too clear and impassable, wasn't it, dear Dick? Only he might—or Virgil might——Somehow, my heart is with the three of you down in that dreadful place. Somehow, life and work seem meaningless of late—I keep thinking of the three of you and your madness. Dear Dick, how good it was of you to go.

“Mary.

“P. S. Tell me more about this island girl.”

I intended to write back at once; indeed, I was at it a rare morning when the sweet damp breath of the flooded forest was pouring out to meet the sun-margin of our glade, when mademoiselle herself came out of the watery isle in her green canoe. We had not had much to do with each other of late; I suppose she had been hunting her honey bees, and yet why should one take axes and block pulleys to hunt honey as twice this week from the baron's platform I had seen Allesjandro do?

She came up and finding no one except myself, sat opposite in the dining hall and looked at my writing portfolio. I glanced up to see her chin in her hand upon the table, her dark eyes thoughtful.

“M'sieu, do you consider it essential to be my enemy?”

“You threw at me, a duck—”

"Ah, will you never forget? Besides, it was such a little one!"

"Ah, well," I sighed. "It landed close to my heart!"

She looked at me suspiciously, but with some approval. I don't know why I said it, but now I saw it was the stuff to use. She smiled with long growing pleasure.

"One's heart, m'sieu—that gives one such a trouble. My heart is like my beautiful isle which is being cut across this way and that, and claimed and stormed over by so many feelings. The baron say it is proper for my education that all the ones of you here bother me so for love, but I do not want. Ah, now, what do so many matter?"

"Do not flatter yourself. They are all too busy except me."

She broke to enrapturing laughter. "The baron say: 'Mademoiselle, I have made an agreement with the doctor-gentleman—he has contracted to love you ardently, so that when you come to your fortune and I take you abroad, you shall know how men speak it in the great world.' "

"He is a fool, mademoiselle. I'm dashed if I will. And you will never come to a fortune. You and Papa Prosper are beggars, to put it plainly.

As for the baron, he is the prince of illusions, but you must not let him drag you into them. Your case comes up in the Court of Appeals, I understand, next month. It is practically lost now. Soon as it is decided the company will turn loose five hundred men and dozens of machines on the reclamation ditches—and the days of your old pirate line in Barataria are done."

She laughed again joyously. "Messieur le Baron he say—"

"I don't care what the baron says. He'll have his finish when Virgil Williams gets control of Isle Bonne. He's insulted Williams too many times with his asinine theories of chivalry. Why should Williams bother about you, mademoiselle? This affair is very strictly business, as you will discover."

"Ah, business!" She clasped her hands pensively. "Messieur le Baron say business is a pig. M'sieu Williams, never can he love me in the world, say Messieur le Baron, and be so for business."

"Get out!" I roared. "*Le nom de Dieu! Diable!* Confound you! That ass of a baron is maddening. He is making you think we all must be in love with you. He is a crazy sentimentalist—he is a—"

"Ah, well! He speaks so prettily to me! What, then, can a woman care, if he be eighty-eight and

oh, so fat!—and with his rooster feather and all! I laugh, I blush—some-a-time; I scold, I do not believe, and run away—but I look back, a little peek-look to see and listen what Messieur le Baron say next to please a lady.”

“Laure,” I said suddenly and soberly: “where did you get your education?”

“Ah, m’sieu, I have little education. Sometimes I know just a little when I think very hard—hold my head so—this a-way. I went five years to convent in N’Awlyins. A little piano and some French of Paris, and some needle work, and all about some queens and kings of La Belle France! Then Papa Prosper, he says: ‘Come home to Isle Bonne, mademoiselle. Men are beginning to fly like ducks and talk across the oceans. *Le nom de Dieu!* The world, he ees too wise fo’ you, Laure—you come back to Isle Bonne.’ So, I come back to my island and we very happy until M’sieu Williams come to destroy our forests and make smoke—*Bom*—such noise and smoke!”

“Is that all, mademoiselle, that Mr. Williams did?”

“Oh, he sit and stare at me—and talk frogs with Papa Prosper!”

“Mademoiselle,” I said severely, looking at that

long slow smile of hers, "five years in the world—even a convent—were quite enough for you. You know too much now. The safest thing when about you is to talk frogs. Mr. Williams saw that—he won't pay any attention to you till he gets his canal built. Then, I fancy, he'll chuck you and Papa Prosper off this island. And the baron—"

"Ah, the baron! He say, with his sword, he will protect me!"

"Williams will pull his castle down under him."

"Ah, then, M'sieu Clell will protect me!"

"He," I retorted grimly, "works for Williams—and anyhow, you can't *work* him!"

"Ah, then—dear Doctor, you will protect me!"

I looked at her. There were tears in her eyes. I had never seen that before. Tears on her long lashes all aglitter; and her child's face was blurring. She covered it. I felt like a pile-driver. Ah, if one can be happy on one's island, it is a shame to drive sticks in it or dig it up!

"You will help me, m'sieu! I have nobody. Papa Prosper he no care for any one except his seed catalogue and his coffee. Messieur le Baron, when he die, I can't go anywhere to talk. There will be no more dukes and wars and castles like in books; but just mostly crabs—and Antoine gone off to be a barbeh!"

"Let's not worry yet. My dear young woman, I'm mighty sorry. I—well, if I owned this confounded land company, I'd break it. I—well, now don't weep. I won't put up with it—I—I—" Now I simply had to take her hands across that table. If I hadn't she'd have wept more. I had to—and she lifted one shoulder to wipe her eyes across her sleeve. I had to hold her shoulder then, and murmur that she must not cry any more. I had to murmur other things; actually, I had not been in such a state for twenty years! I recalled having had my arm about other girls in other years; I remember distinctly how soft and squirmly they used to feel. But Laure was different somehow. I felt strangely content, deliciously at home; she looked up with her eyes half closed, her lithe young form tensed against me, and from her hair was disengaged a faint adorable perfume—but it may have been some stuff the barber sent her.

"Ah, my dear," I whispered. "What does it matter? Suppose that I—even a crabbed bachelor-doctor, such as I—suppose *he* would protect you to the end? Suppose he—he—"

"Loved me?" she murmured back, and her eyes grew orient-long in the shadows of the cypress arches, where the sweet damp of her flooded isle breathed out to us.

"Crazy about you!" I whispered back. "Oh, the fool I am! What the devil am I *at*?"

"You are stroking my cheek, dear Doctor!"

"What am I *doing*?"

"You are kissing me, dear Doctor!"

I groaned. I kissed her again, and groaned again at the delight of it. She was no more like the last woman I kissed twenty years ago than hair tonic is like the odor of the ferns on Isle Bonne ridges.

"I've fallen completely. I—I—oh, Laure, what do you mean by trapping me so! I—I—and you—it's madness!"

"Ah, such madness! Such dear, dear madness! And you tried to detest me—and I you! The wretched duck I hurled at you, *mon cher!* You will be my knight, too, won't you—like the baron!"

"Worse!" I cried. "Or better—whichever it is!"

"Ah, now, you will help me find my fortune!"

"Exactly! Where is it?"

"I don't know. Messieur le Baron is much disturbed. He has had the negroes dig everywhere. Armand's ship went down in Bayou John-the-Fool—ah, but where?"

"Ha!" I shouted. "That's it—where?"

"You will assist us?"

"I will do anything, my darling, except dig. I

am no good in the mud. I will scout or stand guard with Messieur le Baron's sword. I—ah, I love you!"

With what rapture her eyes shone! She ran back laughingly across the baron's dining hall and kissed me. "Ah, *mon Dieu!*—who would have thought such a miracle! My treasure of a doctor!"

There was a scraping at the platform. Laure released me and stole out, pushing up her rumpled hair as she went. I heard a wheezy inquiry from Messieur le Baron. Then her soft answer. How that accent melted with the breeze over her island marsh, how adorable her eagerness to the baron! I slipped to my bedroom and brushed my hair palpitatingly. Ah, what a secret we had now, she and I?—who would suppose that she would be at once enamored of her bald-headed doctor!

Then through the thin walls of the shack I heard Laure breathing hard as she assisted the apoplectic knight over the platform's edge.

"Messieur le Baron, I have almost got another one away from Messieur Williams' dredge company. Ah, how well he does it, just as you said, dear Baron! A man of feeling and culture helps a great deal with my education for dukes, just as you said, dear Baron."

Messieur le Baron gurgled something I could not make out but it had to do with his buttons and the height of the platform. Then he sat up and went on: "Supurb, mademoiselle! We shall keep them all guessing. And I have a great plan—we shall invite them all to Papa Prosper's for a ball—the fiddler has arrived at *Cheniere Couquille*, and we can have a ball."

"A pawty! Then I can wear my gown again. Messieur Williams shall see—"

"I was not thinking of the mud grubber—only to discomfit him!"

"Ah, me!" she sighed, "all-a-time everybody help at my education except *him!*"

I combed the rest of my hair while their voices became more cautiously subdued. Then I sat down and added a postscript to Mary's letter:

"She has got another one. I am it. After me it will be Big Jim, and then Mangy, the cook. That will be Virgil's finish. Ah, my dear and self-sufficient Mary, I am a fool. But you ought to see her—besides, there is nothing to do at John-the-Fool except educate Laure, and I was as lonesome as the little radish."

"Your disconsolate Dick."

## CHAPTER VIII

### HIS LAST MARQUISE

THE spring drouth was on the swamp this month. The trembling prairie, from the mirrored pools of our cypress island to the far shining reefs of the gulf was a myriad-voiced murmur when the dry cane rustled in the wind. Under the yellow stalks the green young shoots grew from the water. Once far off in the blue east a great column of dun smoke hung for days over the Mississippi passes, rising out of the infinite and unseen marshes so that it seemed as if the sea itself was burning. All night long the shadows of the baron's glade were faint amber with a tint of red, and where the smoke drifted into our cypress aisles it appeared imprisoned and never to rise again in the windless depths.

I had made my first venture into the deep swamp. Laure took me in her green canoe. It required a deal of faith to step down in that oscillating needle of wood; the slightest idea on the wrong side of one's head would have upset its equilibrium. She paddled into pathless runs of pools of the forest and

then let us drift while I stared into that gray changeless silence. Black water below and the straight-running and cathedral-like spaces of the hanging moss above, with here and there a faint high fleck of the sky beyond the tallest cypress tops. The deep swamp of Isle Bonne was appalling; I saw Laure smiling at the blankness of my look when I had drunk it all in.

"Are you coming, m'sieu," she said airily, "to my pawty?"

"Party?" I cried incredulously. "Where on earth?"

She pointed a dripping blade into the sunless depths. "At Papa Prosper's. They all coming—from Africa, and Free Camp, and Bassa Bassa and Old *Cheniere* and John-the-Fool."

"Who?"

"Oh, everybody. The music was broke at the last ball at *La Cheniere*, but now Sim, he fixed it. He put two nails in it. Dear Doctor, the baron is not so growly at all you Yankees as formerly. He says let us have a pawty, and serve sherbet anisette and gumbo filé. It will be part of my education, says Messieur le Baron, although there will, of course, be no dukes or anything like that, says Messieur le Baron."

"Very well," I answered, "we'll go to your pawty. You know I told you distinctly that I loved you. Now is Messieur le Baron satisfied?"

She broke to soft laughter. I hated to be a joke even for Laure. I went on irascibly: "Or is it that you merely got another one?"

She looked wide-eyed and murmured: "Oh, you a very wise man, dear Doctor. But I love you a little bit. Oh, just a little bit, but then a good deal for such a little bit. You can dance at my pawty."

I went down to the dredge at dusk when the lean-faced and weary crew was coming off. It was a warm night, the air coming from the black box of a machine heavy with oil smells and burned waste. Clell came down from the crane where he had doggedly mastered the shovel through the weeks. I got a curious new impression of him, his easy slouch and ease and assertion. Silently they had watched him, Virgil and the big engineer, for the break that never came. But the atmosphere of constraint on the dredge was intolerable to me. They had not bridged the gulf; except curt orders no word had passed between them. Virgil was harassed by other things as well. The men he had hoped for from the city for his night shift had not come. He had gone to the city once to plead for credit on

supplies; and had come back grimly facing defeat. But the dredge fought on with the four of them alone. When gears broke, Big Jim and Williams hammered out the repairs in the sooty forge-room, and again the monster ground its way seaward. Once a tow-steamer brought a barge of crude oil and was compelled to lay out in the lake for a week until Virgil arranged payment for the cargo. I don't know how it was done. He brought down black men for his fire-room and the dynamite crew that went ahead in the swamp to blow out the remnants of the sunken primeval forest which lay in his right-of-way—and saw them desert or rebel and disappear, one after another. And he patiently rearranged his working force and went ahead. The dredge had not stopped. Of that he was sure. Somehow in that his honor lay.

"June first," he was murmuring now to me, as he stayed a moment, "we'll be through the last of the dead timbeh. Then the survey runs straight through the *flottant*—I got a two-yard clam for the soft stuff and we'll jam her right through to salt water. I'm going to win, Doctor Dick. I see it now—but last week! Well, I ain't sayin' I'd quit. I just didn't see how I'd raise nine hundred dollars

for that crude oil—that's all. But she's here, and Big Jim's feedin' her in. I feel like celebratin'."

"Come to the pawty," I said. "Saturday night. You're all invited."

He motioned to the island. "That bunch?" Then the serene victoriousness came into his smile: "Wait till I get the ditch in—then I'll ask 'em to mine."

"It'll be a fine pawty," I retorted. "And you can't refuse the lady. You'll go, won't you, Clell?"

"Sure thing. A party at Papa Prosper's will be something."

Big Jim was not so sure. The dredge would lay up Saturday night for the usual overhauling and inspection. He grinned and his worn blue eyes twinkled. "Maybe it would be a good thing to turn loose—I'm getting mighty restive to get out up front for a bat along the levee. Not that there's much excitement at these *cheniere* balls. A half-barrel of red wine, and Sim at his accordion. And it'll run all night and the next afternoon and Sunday night, and any fellow who stays in the game with the girls from the *chenieres* won't be much good for a week after."

Allesjandro came to the dredge the next day with many amiable gesticulations to extend a formal in-

vitation. Ah, the ball it would be! Sim would be there with his accordion of course. "And, m'sieu, mebbe we catch a leetle fiddle from Manila Village. Yas, it sho' fine to have a fiddle with dat accordion. You-all t'ink you be there?"

There was real wistfulness in his voice. He would have the *Good Child* at the end of the canal to take us around the lake to Isle Bonne's front door. There would be a famous breeze surely this time of year; and there was Mr. Williams' launch, if not so. Ah, this time surely, messieur, every one would lay aside these bickerings and come to the ball. What was all this squabble in the courts—certainly Papa Prosper did not care, and as for the baron—well, Allesjandro waved his hand with superb confidence: The Baron John Bernal de Vedrinnes, one time of Austria and the Louisiana Lottery Company—that magnificent gentleman, who could doubt the manner in which he would entertain his enemies?

"Tell the old tom-cat," murmured Virgil, "that the mob will be there. Only clothes—clothes is some scarce fo' a pawty. We ought to have somebody along with this bunch to be pretty-man fo' a pawty." His eyes wandered ever so lightly over Clell then to me. "Big Jim and me ain't in it much. Once,

out in that western country, I knew a cook whose ambition in life it was to get drunk in a dress suit. Yes, seh—that's all he talked about was gettin' soused in evenin' clothes. He was with our outfit two years, and all the time he rustled chuck he told of how he was savin' his money for the big splash in San Antonio. Well, one time he blew on us and hit San Antone with the best goods any tailor in Texas ever turned out. Yes, seh, that cook su'tiny had 'em. Then he got piped and went to the best hotel in the town after the theater, when it was livenin' up some. And while he stood there lookin' fo' a table in all them clothes, some fel-lo sittin' under a little old palm tree in that dinin'-room motions him over and says: ‘Waiter, bring me another demi-tassay.’

“That cook sho’ came right back to the Brazos and blew his head off in my bunk-house.”

The Texan thought of his cook ruefully a moment while we laughed and then his dry comment came. “Clothes is all right. But it all comes down to a man bein’ placed right in his heart. Yes, seh—there’s some sense of ordeh in the world. That cook was a right fine cook, but he showed up like a sifted son-of-a-gun in evenin’ clothes. Me—I’m all

right smashin' this mud-scow through and man-handlin' niggers, but I—well, I got some sense of *ordeh!* So I stay out of some things."

"But you'll come?" I said. "It won't look right for all the boys to go to the ball, and the boss stay away. You can't afford to have the cajuns think you're sore on them."

"You're pretty right, Doctor Dick. Only"—His eye wandered over his loved black monster squatting in the sere rozo cane and ahead of it the infinity of the man's size job—"Well, Mangy and the new nigger can hold down the dredge Saturday night. Some one's got to stay."

So Allesjandro carried back a message of felicitations—and one could trust Allesjandro to paint them to his master—all the Yankees would come to the ball. When I paddled back down the canal that night I caught the red ember of the baron's pipe waving through the twilight. The *Good Child* lay in the little cove, and her skipper was on the platform. Also two tall, lazy swamp blacks uprose, and one of them laid hasty hold of the gun beside him at sight of me. The old man made a quick and imperious gesture of dissent. Then he pounded his usual evening greeting to me on the floor. I was late for the supper that his man had just served but

there was something left—the broiled crabs and rice and ship bread and coffee. He arose and apologized fervently—and like stealthy shadows the furtive blacks slipped away in the flooded forest. But I had marked them; and the baron saw it. One was Hog-jaw, the fellow who had last deserted Williams' crew; and the other I guessed was the outlaw, Crump, of whom the dredgemen had told me—a renegade who had taken to the deep swamp after a killing in a levee camp on the river, and who was a "bad nigger," generally.

My eye went after the two pirogue runners; it was the first time we had connected the islanders directly with the swamp blacks in any manner. It confirmed Virgil's theory of the disappearance of his crew; they were enticed away or waylaid if they would not desert. Virgil and Big Jim had sent word long ago to Crump that they would kill him on sight; and the renegade had sent back his insolent message: "Come in and take me."

The baron had settled back in his chair. "Alles-jandro is hiring the fellows to tong his oysters in the lower bay, my friend," he told me casually, with a wave to the swampers.

"Indeed? I thought it hardly the time of year for that."

"Ah, that is so, is it not? Messieur, what a scoundrel of a world where nothing ever appears as it should!" His bright eye sought me out under its shaggy brow: "My dear Doctor, would you intrude a mere oyster to confuse a gentleman such as I?"

"I would merely pick the pearl of truth from your shell."

His vast gentle laughter came. He tapped his knee with the pipe.

"Allesjandro, a glass of the yellow wine for the doctor. He is worth it, he amuses me. He is a true friend at that; I told my little marquise this morning that she was honored twice over—first, that Messieur le Doctor told her that he loved her as was stipulated, and second, that he seemed to mean it!"

"Did she tell you all about it!"

"Capital! To the last detail. She enacted it to me gravely—every bit; and then said to me, most plaintively: 'Alas, I am afraid he does love me. It would break my heart to pain the good doctor!'"

"The heart of the good doctor," I rejoined, "is not a cooking-school custard for damsels to smear about at their pleasure." I leaned to him and tapped his pipe: "Go catch your dukes, my dear Baron—your happy islander can smile and she can weep. What more education does she need?"

"Ah," he sighed. "I must get her away within a year. I am positively glad you came—you and this alert young man from the north—it has made her forget the cursed barber against whom I fought, in her heart, for two years. But, ah—a woman! One never can tell. I have had experience."

"You have not profited by experience, it seems."

"Never! What is so unprofitable? It argues a hardening of the heart—a sophistication of the soul, when a man should be keeping his sensibilities green for the ever-recurring whims of fortune. Messieur, the field in which a man can make an ass of himself is illimitable—that is what keeps one young of heart." He waved his prodigious pipe: "Look at me now. Five fortunes have I made and lost, and at last, being seventy-five and penniless again, I saw what absurd penalties one pays for industry and application. I roared to myself: 'Here, you—John Bernal, from now on you shall devote yourself to the fashioning of one last exquisite thing before death comes like a frowsy old woman and throws a pan of dirty water over you. You shall find your last romance, you shall come to a child's delight, you shall thrill with the nobleness of service again, and then die like a beggar in the road, but with the last of life's gold just slipped from your fingers.' There-

fore I wandered, seeking it—and behold! The gods threw me this way—to my marquise of the isle! Ah, is she not beautiful?"

"I suppose so," I murmured languidly to all his chatter.

"Sir?" He sat up straightly.

'Really, my dear Baron, on her nose, one imagines the ghost of a freckle—"

"What?" The old fellow turned about on me grasping his pipe.

"Oh, very well! Yes, of course she is beautiful."

He relaxed from that gorilla ferocity. "And clever?"

"Stupendously."

"And good?"

"Ah, Messieur le Baron!" I rolled my eyes, positively overcome. Really, I was getting very good at this sort of thing. "Ah, Baron!"

"Ah, Doctor! You, also, are getting your education. I shall make of you the man I was—at forty. *Voilà!* the way I could talk to them! You should have heard me and a pretty woman. Ah, the youth, I lived—there are bits of it yet in my old bones—to say nothing of my soul!"

Back he sat with his great pipe bowl on his fat knee and chuckled. "Allesjandro! Play the music!"

You know what when I am feeling so! From *La Favorita*, or one of the old ones!"

And when he heard the bars of that infernal phonograph of his squalling its diabolic course, he sighed: "Eh, well, my good friend. It is a trifle out-at-the-heels, my gallant's song, but think of the soul trying to crawl through the scratches."

Mosquito time came and the baron had to retire under his bar, but still the bed shook with his keeping of time with the music. The bowl of his pipe stuck through a rent, and the red ember glowed. I, in my own bunk, watched it and then the grinning Allesjandro out in that smoky room fighting the mosquitoes and keeping the phonograph at its operatic airs. He slapped citronella on himself and ground the squeaky reel, while the baron muttered his approval. It was a fine slobber of sentiment out of which the baron finally roared to me: "Ah, tell me now—could we, as gentlemen, allow her to marry a barber?"

Messieur le Baron, always, after the fourth glass of his wine, reverted to the original grievance that had detained him at Isle Bonne. At the fifth he had the barber down and the point of his rapier on his gullet; and at the sixth the man was hanged and quartered; at the seventh, ah I will not relate!

After that I have known a joust with the barber to break down the baron's bed!

After a while Allesjandro ceased his winding of the phonograph. I saw him stealing away in his skiff to retire on his lugger that lay out in the cove of the swamp. There was a full moon, and from the height of our platform above the forest pool I could look far out across the encircling marshes to where the light lay in a great splash of yellow on Barataria Bay. I was watching it when a stir came. I could not make it out at first.

Then it became a soft parting of the thatch across the room from me near the baron's bed, and just at the level of the floor.

Silently I watched that scratching. Then a whisper came.

“Monsieur?”

“*Mon chère!*”

“Messieur le Doctor is quite asleep?”

“I am as sure as I am of your beauty,” breathed the baron, “that I heard him snore. I was waiting for you, mademoiselle.”

“Ah, if we were only rid of him—this night would be like the other beautiful nights! Ah, messieur, we could talk all night!”

“Hear the good doctor snore—or is it an insect in

the palms? He sleeps like all the others. Ah, *mon chère!*" He reached through his netting and was patting her head. "After all, there is no one of them all like me, is there now?"

"None at all, messieur, who can speak like you."

He gurgled softly and I knew he was kissing her fingers. "Mademoiselle, you should have heard me even thirty years ago. Alas, my dear!" He was getting out of bed with many a sigh. "I knew you would come, little night lark. Never would you drowse with that fool of a grandfather when there is a moon like this."

"The dear doctor—hear him snore."

"Infamous! If he were the man I was at his age, even, he would be beating out the woods for you, he would be cudgeling his head for a phrase to offer you. Name of God—hear the man snore! Romance is dead in this world, my Marquise, except for me. But I—I tell you you are divine."

"*Merci*, Messieur le Baron."

"Never will you think of a barber again, will you?"

"Alas—poor Antoine! After all he write me he is not much of a barbeh, and so can he come back and marry me?"

"I will chase him off the island again. Ah, when

we leave here, my Marquise, you shall have a lover such as I was—yet not quite."

"Here is this New York fel-lo," she sighed. "Only I'm sure he has a lady somewhere nawth. He is sad at times. And the good doctor—ah, me, when shall I know enough to be a credit to you, messieur? I really don't want to love any one—it is a terrible bore to play at it."

"Have patience. You will have an exquisite revenge on all of them, even that grim ox, Williams. You can snap your small fingers in his face—I tell you I know what I am about."

"The wind," she murmured presently, "is south-east—and there is no rain. Messieur, somehow, I am frightened at your plan."

"When it is done we shall shrug our shoulders; the ways of God and the course of the wind are inscrutable."

"Ah, but—" she cried suddenly, and as if in pain, "I do not wish to hurt *him*—no, no—not that! I am afraid of him, and yet—and yet—"

"And yet what, mademoiselle?"

"There is a mosquito on your nose, messieur," she rejoined absently, and I heard her seedy knight whack himself roundly after it.

## CHAPTER IX

### A BALL AND A BETRAYAL

**T**HE night of the ball we reached Isle Bonne late. There had been some trouble with the motor, and when the launch at length drew out of Virgil's canal into the tidal lakes and turned westward along the thick cane shore that stretched to the *cheniere*, the moon was high and big, and the south wind brought a fancied murmur of the surges beyond the outlying reefs.

There came the scraping of a violin somewhere from the shadows beyond Isle Bonne's shell white shores; then a dim light on Papa Prosper's gallerie, and down the plank wharf the guests streamed to meet us. On the beach many pirogues were drawn, in the offing rode half a dozen luggers, their sails limp; and as many tubby little gas boats were grouped about the wharf-head.

And many were the soft "*bon soirs*," and shy greetings. I did not know the lonely *chenieres* held so many folk. But from all the lakes and shrimp

camps and swamp bayous they had come to Laure's party. Our wood saint was all gaiety in a white gown—white, indeed, from her slipper toes to the wild blackberry bloom in her hair. She led the procession that escorted us Yankee fel-los along the shell beach to the old sto' and introduced us along the way. There was Elodie, the daughter of a shrimp captain from Bassa Bassa; and Anastasie, from Periac Woods, and Antoinette from Grand Isle, and Felecie and Jeannie from lower Barataria, and Juanita Du Fong, the Chino-Spanish girl from the Cavagnac coast of whom it was proudly said her uncle was in the penitentiary, convicted of peonage in his shrimp camp. Oh, many the girls there were at our ball, and shyly they looked at the strangers from among their brown-throated brothers and sweethearts in the dim-lighted hall. On the gallerie up rose Papa Prosper with, as ever, his ancient city newspaper upside down, removing his cigarette from his loose, gray-shaven lip. The baron was there, and Papa bowed with profound courtesy to show Messieur le Baron, one time of the Louisiana Lottery Company and *le bon Dieu* only knew where else, how a Creole gentleman of the south *chenieres* could retain the graces of his ancestors at vice-regal courts.

"Ah, messieurs, five weeks now I have sat here to await you to call. I would not go feesh, I would not go crab, I would not go fo' nuttin'; fo' I says: 'Prosper, it is not courteous dat you go fo' work when dem gentlemen may call some time.' Isle Bonne, all over, she await you."

"All a-time Papa expect somebody to call," put in Laure. "So never does he expect to go to work."

We assured Papa of our appreciation. About the old sto' skipped small boys and girls shaving tallow candles to make the boards more smooth. On the ancient counter of Prosper's defunct store sat Sim, the accordion man and a pimply young fiddler, and now they began a crochety waltz. And when the silent young couples were off, I turned to see the baron keeping time with his pipe. Vast was his delight; broad was the benignity which he beamed forth upon Virgil who sat against the gallerie rail. About us swarmed the gentle youngsters fearing to enter the ballroom yet filled with that ecstasy of Sim, the accordion man, and the little fiddler. Down each side of the hall sat the shawled swamp mothers, their nun-black garb setting off the white dresses of the dancers. Every one danced except these—the lanky, solemn-faced fishers and wiry hunters, a rotund little sto' clerk from La Fourche; even Big

Jim, our engineer, secured the favor of the Chino-Spanish girl and towered above them all with many a wink back to his boss. Virgil declined it all.

"Somehow, it doesn't run in our family," he commented. "Most balls I been to wound up in a shootin' anyhow, so I just got so I only stick around and watch fo' which fel-lo opens up the trouble. But I ain't insinuatin' anything, Doctor. These cajun balls ain't that way—unless you strike one at the shrimp camps after pay-day."

His eye followed the merry-makers with a humor of condescension; clearly he felt a superiority to the swamp folk who in turn looked upon him in amiable but shifty evasion. The feud of Isle Bonne was known to them all, but though they wondered at our presence at the ball, their rare native courtesy kept the slightest gossip under cover.

Other guests were arriving, mainly lean-hipped market hunters from the deep swamp who beached their pirogues and came up in their very tight trousers and well-washed denims. Softly they greeted us, and bright-eyed they peered within the hall. To each up rose Papa Prosper and the baron, one on either side of the door, and welcomed them with their grandest airs. Neither would be outdone; if Messieur le Baron bowed twice, Papa bowed thrice,

and being as lean as the worthy baron was fat, he could bow just twice as far in half the time.

"Ah, dis life," sighed Papa, "too many balls, m'sieu, it would be bad as work. Wan time when I was a young man I went to a ball at *La Cheniere* and me—dat tired I did get. I say, 'Prosper, neve' no more you go fo' dis fast life. It is best fo' you, Prosper, dat you go sit on you' gallerie—mebbe so, some time you get rich lak a millionaire."

Behind his pipe the baron grunted dissent from this pleasing possibility. "See now what a noble line has come to, Doctor," he murmured to me. "Forty years he has sat looking off his gallerie, and now behind him the Yankees have come—" he broke off with his sly old wink. "Ah, well, we have a truce to-night, have we not?" He flourished his pipe at the door. "Had I two good legs and more wind in me!" He chuckled a fat little girl under the ear as she passed. Then he pounded the floor with his foot. "But here I sit, the devil take it! And my marquise, oh, the life I would have for her! Youth was never made for the chimney corners—let it roar forth songs, friendships, loves—go homeward at dawns and sleep off the price it pays. Ah, Doctor, the price is high but worth it—look at me now? Could anything purchase the memories I have?"

And he winked a Machiavellian blessing on the waltzers, rapping out the time with his pipe. Papa Prosper nodded: "Ah, dis life! We people of the swamp, m'sieu, we have a sayin' in *crevasse* time when it rain and the water all about our platforms: 'When she come from the bottom up and she come from the top down, God meant us to be wet.' When a young man be with a girl with the music so, and the moonlight across Isle Bonne woods so, God meant it fo' love."

Wondrous was their moonlight and the south wind from their sea! I watched all that gentle youth within until the dingy hall fell away in long vistas over-arched by dreams—and then I was aware that my eyes were upon Clell and Laure. They were swinging slowly in the soft light; with his tall fair ease, looking down at her upturned face, and she answering him with that air of distinction, of whimsical appeal and caressing which she could use. I became aware that every one was looking at them. One dissatisfied damsel, brushing by me with her escort to the cooler gallerie, voiced it:

"Laure Drouillot, all a-time she dance with that Yankee fel-lo. Me—I don't care, but she needn't talk to us about mannehs!"

Virgil was watching them also. I saw the dumb

wistfulness of the man who had given his youth to fighting years and had, along the way, forgotten something that might have made them fairer. He did not dance; he declined both the baron's studied importunities and Laure's jesting glances.

"That a man should want to think of digging ditches when he might dance," she murmured, with ever so faint a suggestion of hostile fires; and tucked away in a corner of the gallerie, her white slippers clear of the rough floor, I heard her sigh to her young Yankee fel-lo, who seemed to be the next one: "Ah, of you I can not believe that, M'sieu Clell." She looked languidly at the Texan across the gallerie. "Sometime I do not believe your heart is in it—this digging up of our isle."

"When I'm here with you," Clell answered, "I can't believe it myself."

Virgil heard him. To tell the truth, one of my reasons for getting them here this evening was to see if some fortuitous thing would not bring the two out of their implacability—it was getting to be ghastly to me. I had an impression now that Laure was guessing at it. She had turned intently to watch the Texan, measuring him as he sat listening to old Prosper's meanderings. The baron was behind them, and now I saw him signal to the girl. I was

sure of it, a smile, a beckon, a shrug that indicated Williams. And she seemed to hesitate, watching across her fan; and then, at a more decided and silent request from the old man, she slipped down and was across to Virgil. She tapped his sleeve, with a smile. He turned, startled at the manifest invitation.

"Ah, if you won't dance with Elodie or me, come try the sherbet anisette." She laughed as if daring him to unbend, to be one of them and with her. "Won't you, now, m'sieu? Come—for to-night, a truce. Come—on the other gallerie, where the sherbet is. And there's a little seat. We will not talk of Isle Bonne—only *nom de Dieu!* What folly to sue us. It has been ours since the days of the vice-roys of Spain."

He went along with her a trifle hesitant now at her ardent intent to please him. When he was seated, she found a perch on the gallerie rail, and, nibbling one of the little cakes that Juan Rojas, the head villager of Isle L'Ourse, had brought from the river towns, she continued her arch interest as though, at last, really wanting to know what sort of an animal it was burrowing across her island.

Virgil seemed to be wondering and yet I knew he was bewildered by the closeness of her, her airs,

at once barbaric and quaintly of an exquisite and vanished breeding, touched with the pertness of to-day. For she could show all of these at times; I was more astonished, as I noted her evening's transformation. She wore her gown—the simple rich gown of the Comus ball imported by that New Orleans aunt—with an odd and merry nonchalance in that rough room in an endeavor to make the other girls feel at ease.

But Virgil seemed directly indifferent to her chatter. Presently he faced her seriously.

"I been wonderin' why you brought me ove' here to-night?"

She started; her eyes had been on the wall of forest behind the house; a shimmer of moonlight fell through upon the pools, but it seemed to take the pink of dawn. Within the wide hall the droning waltzes went on; there were no other dances, and the luckless sto' clerk from La Fourche who tried to dilate upon the tango to the islanders, got only wondering stares. The floor shook with the waltzers' movements; but out here in the cool dark the rough edges were taken from the festivities. I was all but asleep with the peace of Laure's isle; one could just make out that she was leaning to Virgil from the gallerie.

"I thought, perhaps, m'sieu, as we are such excellent enemies, we should be better acquainted."

"Ah," I mused, "so, at last *he* is to be the next one? Well, you can not win Virgil from his own job—personal and specified."

The Texan was answering calmly; if he had ever loved the girl, he held himself aloof from it now. "Enemies? I hate to call it that. Only, I neve' had the chance to be anything else—it was my game, you see."

"And mine," she murmured, "was just to hate you, so. Only—one wonders—one can not have exactly as one wishes, after all."

"No." She might have known how vain her coquetry was from his voice; perhaps she did. At least she sighed, and drew herself up to a small heap in the corner. He went on steadily: "One of these days you and Papa Prosper will be sorry you didn't accept the forty thousand the company offered you three years ago fo' a quit-claim."

"And cut up our island?"

"Five years more," Virgil retorted irrelevantly, "this timber will be out of the swamp and all your prairie will be raising early stuff for the Chicago markets. Isle Bonne'll be the first good to the world it ever was. But you—you little thing. The

world'll be a pretty rough place for you when you have to get out in it. It isn't flowers and honey bees; and all you know here of woods and wateh won't be any manneh of use to you then. That's why I'm sorry."

"You are sorry, messieur?"

"Yes."

"Ah, that is good! My little saint in there upon the wall—some-a-time I ask her a little prayer for to change your heart." I heard him stir; he was not used to that—to women and the softness of the night, to pretty speeches and allurements. Clell would have met her with banter or with a sentiment of her own. But Virgil—well, I thought of Mary and the twelve years the man waited for her stubbornly before he gave her up. If there was love in him, it was like the strength in him, wrought of the beaten metal of defeat. Laure might play with him, but she had best let his sleeping soul lie. If it slept!

"You little thing!" he muttered suddenly. "They got no call to let you stay in all this foolishness. They fill you with dreams, they neve' let you come face to face with things. If they did you wouldn't fight me or my job yondeh. Things would have been different."

I could not catch her low answer. I wondered what would have been different with him or with her. What stubborn triumph had he planned?

"Well," I mused. "Bother them all. I have done my duty even as my host saw it. I proposed to the minx—what more can the old buzz-saw of a baron desire? As for the rest of it, thank God, I am forty-six. Youth is a manifest disaster, and the sooner done the better."

I opened my eyes again and flicked a mosquito from the tip of my ear. They were talking more softly; and within the store the droning music and the shuffle of feet went on. Out in the moonlight offing a fisher was singing on his lugger and his furnace fire of charcoal made a red spot in the night. Beyond him the giant gars leaped among the floating lilies, and beyond that was the starry dusk. But my eyes wandered sleepily to the left where was the impenetrable cypress jungle. A pink bloom was against or behind it. And while I watched this, some one came along the gallerie and leaned to me. It was Clell, and he motioned to the forest.

"The marsh is burning. Big Jim says it must be beyond the canal, and the wind is right to bring it in. Where's Williams?"

"There." I motioned to them. But Clell did not

go on. Never yet had he directly addressed his superior save at their work, and then coolly, curtly, nothing more than was needed.

"Tell him," Clell muttered, "the dynamite boat is in the main ditch not thirty yards from the dredge—and in the fire-line as that wind holds."

Virgil must have heard him. I knew his chair had dropped swiftly. He was on his feet and by us, staring about the end of the gallerie where now the south was a glow beyond the forest wall.

"Mangy and Al are asleep in the quarter-boat, too." He lifted a hand to test the breeze. "You cain't tell how it's blowin' here." He turned his quick glance in the hall. And there I saw the Baron de Vedrinnes' vast bulk in the door, and he was smiling. Virgil shot a look at me. Then he jumped nearer with clenched hands.

For an instant I thought he would seize the old fellow by the neck. The baron was bowing. The play was obvious enough from his sardonic airs. Williams turned, checking his words, saw Laure beyond in the semi-darkness, and came past me to her. He stopped full before her and spoke quietly.

"You asked me here to-night, you showed me the first real kindness in all the years I been here. And I see now—I see why you had me sit there"—he

pointed to the gallerie corner—"my back to the woods and the prairie beyond—the prairie dry as tinder, and my dredge in it."

"M'sieu?" She was looking wonderingly at him.

"You knew I reckon, that there are two men sleepin' on it, and four tons of dynamite and black powder in the ditch near 'em? Did you?"

The baron was bowing again with profound courtesy. The other guests were straying out in wonderment. The music had ceased. The Texan fingered his white hat before Laure and spoke on quietly.

"Killin' two men—you didn't think of that, did you?"

The motor on the launch broke out to whirring as Big Jim got the boat turned. The Texan was moving past me, when Laure came.

"M'sieu, you did not think—you can not think—"

"I know," he answered. "They did it—the baron's niggers. But you—did you know?"

She did not answer. The baron was rubbing his hands. The half world to the south was growing brighter. The Texan looked resolutely at her. "Did you? Say no—and I'll believe you."

She could not. She fled past him suddenly to the end of the wharf; she was reaching her hands to

Clell in the launch, when Virgil brushed grimly past her into it. He did not look at her again.

"Redfield, are you goin' in with me—to drag that dynamite away from the machine. There's a chance—just one chance."

"Yes," Clell retorted, "I'm going."

They crouched low in the boat as it shot out and around the gleaming shell point of Isle Bonne to the lake. "Nine miles," I heard the boss mutter, and he held a lantern to his watch. "Nine miles, and that ditch will be a pit of fire every foot from the lake boom."

Then they disappeared; and I stood listening to the faint beat of the motor, looking at the red sky beyond the cypress wall. The swampers on Prosper's gallerie were listening curiously. In the splotch of light at the door stood the baron.

"Ah, my friends," he said, "it is not yet twelve—compose yourselves. The gentlemen have gone, but the night is young."

Laure and myself were left on the end of the wharf. "See here," I demanded. "That old devil knew! I wondered why this affair was got up—and we were asked. If that dredge burns, Williams loses his contract—and he's done for. You knew that!"

She clasped her hands. "Why did you let them go! They can't get in—the canal is filled with fire."

"They will go in—there are a fireman and a cook there. And the dredge—did you think Williams would abandon it?"

"The powder boat—they will not dare approach!"

"They will. And look here—you never thought of that, did you! If they are killed—"

With a cry, she turned and ran from me. And I followed, hating her as nearly as I had hated any one. My boy was there flying into that fire-filled ditch with death at the farther end. He would not have refused Virgil if the boss had asked him to step into hell—for the pride of the man's size job. But there was Mary, I was thinking of.

I found the girl throwing off the line from her cypress canoe.

"I shall go—I can be there before them!" she cried, "through the swamp—will you go with me, messieur?"

I stepped into the ticklish thing. With a draw of her paddle swiftly down among the cypress spikes she shot the pirogue on. I had a vision of Papa Prosper, his hands up in horror, gazing after us; and heard a shout from the baron. He stood in the light, waving his pipe furiously. When the pirogue

slipped from the first dense shadows into a watery aisle of the forest, a fleck of the moonlight fell upon Laure's face. It was very tense, darkling with resolves and rebellions.

I steadied myself and watched the play of her lithe strong arms as she swept the needle of wood onward on the unfathomable trail.

"You know the way, mademoiselle?"

She laughed hardly. "Isle Bonne—my island? There is no leaf in its big woods is not my little friend!"

"Well," I drew out my pipe and lighted it. "You have murdered two men to-night—perhaps four. What does the little saint on the wall back there, in your pirate isle, think of that?"

She would not answer, her eyes staring now at the blood red of the horizon where we caught a bit of it down a space of the flooded forest.

## CHAPTER X

### A GOWN—AND DYNAMITE

L AURE found her way across the three miles of cypress to the floating prairie, with me facing her in the bow of her tiny dugout—by what miracle of wood-sense I do not know. About immense windfalls of down timber where we lifted the dead limbs and the tangle of bamboo brier to slip under, between huge, rotted stumps festooned with great ferns, pushing through the myriad-spiked areas about the buttresses of the standing cypress—somehow she found a trail through pool and water aisle, and as we neared the burning prairie, the gloom under the moss canopy became the pink of a furnace, a living curtain palpitant with the twisting, changing sheen of the embers.

We saw now the caney spaces between spurs of the dead forest, and the sloughs shining red. And outlined against the line of fire was Virgil's dredge, its huge crane lifted, the black bulk of the house and the windows under the smoke billows. Then the trees hid it. But the girl turned to me sharply.

"You lied to frighten me. There are no men there!"

"Where could they go?" I retorted. "They could not cross the floating prairie. They must be—and Williams will find them—the launch is in that canal now coming with the wind and fire. And they have to pass the dynamite boat to reach them."

"They can't!" she answered. "It is too late."

"They will."

She bit her finger-tips with a fury or remorse, I could not tell which. "They did not tell me—*they* did not tell me!" she whispered.

"Who did not—and tell you what?"

But she merely muttered, and stared down the shining line of Virgil's canal of which we could catch a glimpse. For a mile from a near turn it was a slit of a mirror, ruffled along one margin by the breeze, but the far end was lost in a lurid curtain. Out of that they would have to come in the launch—if they ever got that far in from the lake end of the ditch.

"And they will," I retorted again. "Nothing will stop them."

"See there," she cried. "The dynamite boat—it's two hundred yards from the dredge. Oh, if the fire would reach it now—before they appear. Mes-

sieur Doctor, if we could explode it—*they* would be safe.”

“Yes, but—”

She had swerved the canoe sharply about and was among the fantastic trees in that red and unearthly gloom. So silently, with impetuous passion, she worked that I did not comprehend what she was doing until the pirogue swept out in a glade, margined with tall saw-grass at the edge of the forest; and then I saw something that made me forget her in my astonishment.

The pirogue was grounding in one of the low hard ridges of shells that ran so mysteriously through the swamps. And from this ridge something sheered up before me; I put my hand to it—upon dry, rotted planking, a chain, a rusted stay. It was the broken stem of a schooner!

The girl was out and flying along the ridge. Then I saw a dying fire before which stood a negro, and beyond him apparently a rough stockade built out over the water and seemingly over the midship section of the sunken vessel. Above this stockade was a rude derrick. On the top of this sat another negro who was looking down with amazement to mademoiselle. She was speaking to them sharply. They turned to look at me and I saw the stupefied fear

on their broad shining faces. One was Hogjaw, the renegade fireman from the dredge; and there was menace in his recognition of me.

Slowly I was grasping the meaning of the stockade of slabs. It was a rough caisson built over the sunken cabin of that rotted schooner; planks and timbers driven down on either side of her gunwale and across her beam. In some manner and at some high tide she had been beached here, her prow high over the shell ridge, her stern beneath the black waters of the glade.

And the midnight workers were trying to pump the water from her midsection; that was the meaning of the caisson and the rude derrick that supported the rusty length of pump. I jumped on the edge of the stockade and looked over the red pools and runways to the marsh. Now, I knew. A mile away was Williams' dredge and another round of cutting through the marsh would bring it almost upon the secret workers at the wrecked ancient schooner. And a phrase of Laure's came back to me from her night conference with the baron:

"The dredge must not go a mile farther—there is danger!"

Danger to what?

I had no chance to ask her. She was back upon

me suspiciously, seeing me peering over the stockade. Now she carried a rifle and slid it under the thwarts of her pirogue. "Come—come," she cried: "I have a plan for them—those fools who will rush into death!"

"What is this here?" I demanded.

"Never mind, messieur." She flashed an imperious glance on me: "I told you long ago some things—I suppose you will learn more. But, now—"

She swept her craft out in the pool. The burning grass was showering down about us; the heavens were a flame from the far sea margins to the zenith. When we were a hundred yards out in the marsh, the light was as from a world on fire. Isle Bonne woods were a black patch with far points of flame reaching on either side of us.

Laure brushed her hair back. I offered to assist her and got in return, her open contempt.

"Help? What can you do? Can you paddle a pirogue? You—you can hardly balance yourself in it. Sit still!"

"You might tell me what wild scheme this is. Mademoiselle, you are steering us into certain death."

"Well, then," she said passionately, "go back—you can swim and crawl to the *cheniere*—and hide

in the timber if you desire. It will not burn—only the cane will burn over the *flotteau*."

"You can not scorn me like that, mademoiselle. You know I won't leave you to go alone. Only, what are you going to do—what help for those men whom you and the baron got into this trap?"

She shrugged. "You have no proof of anything."

"You are trying to prevent us from finding out why you are digging into that old wreck. That is the main reason why you are trying to delay the dredge—that and to make Williams lose his contract."

"Yes? Suppose that wreck is mine? Suppose it was my Great-uncle Armand's schooner, and was driven in here by the hurricane? Do you remember Last Island, messieur, and 1854?"

I did, and I told her so tartly. I added that Armand was a slave-runner and a smuggler, and some other of her older family history that all the south coast people knew. Then she laughed impatiently, a trifle wildly: "*Non de Dieu!* Who cares? What do a few pirates in one's family matter? Be still—am I not stricken enough, to-night? Messieur, only last week you said you loved me!"

"Exactly—and I didn't mean a word of it." She stopped paddling and looked at me dangerously.

That unearthly light made her a red and gold girl with a mute hard face, a medallion from a fiery cast—hot but passionless; something that could sting and feel not.

Then she swept the sliver of wood on through the narrow channel of the cane. “Messieur, I know a deal more than you think I do—I did not need your love-making for my education.”

“That is the joke of it,” I retorted. “And anyhow, making love to you would bore me desperately. Throwing ducks and burning dredges are not exactly the manners I would desire.”

Then she laughed again, and plunged her young strength against the paddle blade. “Yankees so amuse one,” she murmured, and her glance went now at the mirrored channel and now at my face. “And they are so helpless! Here is my rifle—could you hit a post-card with it at one hundred yards?”

“Not a bit—and what is excellent, I do not have to.”

She was watching the domes of smoke cloud at the zenith. The fire-line was not a mile distant now. Presently the crooked shallow run of the marsh we were following opened to a reedy lakelet



"Yankees so amuse one," she murmured



and out of this we came to a slough across which I saw the dredge again.

"See there," I cried, and pointed out the figures of two men on it.

She nodded. And then she cried out in a new fear. We had come out into the dug channel now, and far down its shining length to the east we saw the launch against the fire-line. It had come through, by some miracle, and was sweeping on to us. Laure steadied her boat a moment. The dredge was not a quarter of a mile in the other direction. And all along the farther margin of the ditch the fire was running. Only the line of dredged mud held its intolerable heat from us. Down the canal it had leaped the water in half a dozen places and was racing along both banks. When it reached us —well, I felt of the water. It was warm under the reflected heat.

I pointed toward the dredge. "The dynamite," I muttered. "You see, mademoiselle?"

"I see. The fire is to it—the moorings are burning. It will drift out and down toward those men on the dredge—"

"Not if Williams can reach it first!"

She glanced at the launch not a half-mile distant.

"He will never reach it, messieur. None of those madmen. Nor will it reach the dredge." She had grounded the pirogue on the canal side across from the fire and was out among the great clods. I staggered out and to her side. The sweep of the hot wind was intolerable; the first draw of it down my lungs made me reel. I saw Laure muffle her mouth and nose in the hollow of her elbow. But she stumbled on down the embankment, dragging the rifle after her.

"Laure!" I shouted, "come back—what are you doing?"

She was measuring the distance intently to the square-ended scow under whose corrugated roof was stored the dynamite. I stared at her and then the launch that was speeding on to pass us. Suddenly she turned to me and cried out.

"In which end of the hold is the black powder!"

"It is forward—in cannisters of tin, I think. The dynamite is boxed."

And before the words left me she had fired the automatic rifle deliberately into the scow side. It was a good two hundred yards away but drifting out now plainly in the blazing margin of the canal. The dredge beyond it was hidden in the billowing smoke. And again the girl fired—again and again.

I could not hear the reports in the roar of the fire across from us. It was searing my face, and my clothes were blazing. Laure fired again at the dynamite scow. I heard her mutter despairingly. She could not locate the black powder cans with her steel-jacketed bullets—and each instant Virgil's launch was sweeping on to pass us, to plunge on into the fiery pass to rescue his imprisoned men. She saw the launch now almost abreast of us. And they saw us; I caught Clell's blackened face aghast, staring at the sight of us on the levee line. And while I was motioning to him, to Virgil who was crouched over his steering wheel, the earth went out from under my feet, the sky collapsed.

I came to my senses slowly, knowing only that I was trying to lift my face out of the black mud; that over and past me a swift surge of water had come; and then that Laure was pounding at my back, crying for me to rise up. For a moment I could not get the stuff from my eyes; then I saw a dark world about us, shot with falling sparks and beyond this an outer space of fire. Men were stumbling up the wrecked levee. In places it had been blown sheer with the grass line. The fire was out for hundreds of yards about us, the marsh was a black carpet with winking flecks of fire. I knew

now that Clell was trying to help me to my feet; that Big Jim had lifted Laure who, it seemed, had now fallen insensible.

Virgil stood on the highest point of his wrecked embankment staring down the canal. Presently, among the dense bursts of smoke from the black plain I saw an outline of his dredge. That was what he was looking for apparently. Merely that, for he turned to us quietly, with a sigh.

"Blew that fire out for a hundred yards beyond it," he murmured. "Yes, seh! The only spot in ten square miles that didn't go." Then he looked at the far woods of the black island. "And you came through there, Doctor Dick—with her?"

I tried to speak but the breath was blown from me. The Texan had knelt to feel of her cheek. Then he lifted her and strode down to the launch that had been smashed into the canal bank by the tidal wave from that dynamite. Slowly he trickled a bit of the warm water on her brow; then wiped it away with his sleeve.

"I'm a son-of-a-gun," he murmured again gently, "she did the only thing that could have saved the dredge."

"She did it," I muttered, "to save you. Damn your dredge!"

The girl was writhing on the levee side and muttering in her patois of the swamps. Clell squeezed more dirty water from his handkerchief so that it fell upon her temples, and upon her gown of the Comus ball, that one link of the world to her wild island. After a while she gasped, breathed slower and then Clell raised her gently so that she sat and stared about her. Big Jim, sitting on the gunwale of the overturned launch, looked her over casually. Virgil, his arms crossed, seemed to speak out of a great content at length.

"I asked you to deny you knew of it," he said, "and you couldn't. You tricked me. I cain't fo'get that—but I can fo'get you. And I will."

He turned aside to look at the motor-boat, and then beyond to the flecks of fire about his loved monster. We heard Mangy hallooing in scared fashion from some hiding-place. The Texan spoke again impersonally as if to us all.

"I don't fight that way. I don't hit from behind."

I saw Laure's face whiten beneath his slow scorn. Suddenly I was seized with an unreasoning anger at Virgil and his affairs, whether they involved my own ruin or not. I shook my fist wildly at them all.

"Hit from behind? Why she just saved you—saved all of you, your lives and fortunes—with the

crack of that gun! And there's not a man of you could have crossed the swamp and done it! Not one!"

I glared at the three men, black and tattered as they were. The Texan watched me and his old serene smile came again. He moved nearer to the girl who was sitting up bewilderedly in the saw-grass and staring at the lurid sky-line. "Well, then—fo' that, I thank you. Just that."

She held her heavy hair back from her brow which must have been aching as badly as my own from the concussion of that dynamite.

"I did not desire you to die, m'sieu," she muttered slowly. "As for the rest I shall not answer. I answer nothing. I hate you again!"

"I beat you," he replied quietly. "I expaict I did —you little thing—as if matters weren't hard enough without fightin' you." He looked again with a mighty pride at his black squat machine. "But I can do that, too—personal and specified."

He went on back to where Clell and Big Jim had gone to inspect what damage the twenty thousand dollar dredge might have incurred from the dynamite. I was left alone with Laure on the levee side in the unearthly glare of the far fires on the marsh and against the fringe of the dying forest.

I became aware that she was weeping now, silently and alone, a prisoner on the Texan's line of earth.

"Please, please, child," I began. "It's not so bad as that—bad enough for tears."

"Yes, it is!" she cried, and sobbed again. "Look—*look*—my little gown! My Paris gown of the Comus ball. The Carnival King complimented me—he said it was pretty—my little gown!"

I had to let her cry it out.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE HATE OF MEN

**A**T sunrise after a wretched few hours while the men dragged the swamped launch from the canal, bailed and righted it, and had begun to take an inventory of the damage done, I came upon Virgil silently looking at the corrugated iron roof of his dredge. A six-foot length of the stern post of the dynamite scow had hurtled down through the iron and smashed a steam-pipe on the boilers, and another piece of débris had neatly clipped a section of the rim from a gear wheel that operated his two-yard "clam-shell" bucket.

The boss looked at his watch thoughtfully. "Two weeks," he mused, "that's what the pawty cost me." He looked down the shining length of his canal, and then forward at the pathless waste of saw-grass and tidal pools yet to be traversed to save his option on the lands beyond Isle Bonne. "I'm going to beat it out front to-day and get the new fittin's in N'Awlyns. Two weeks gone out of our sixteen, Doctor Dick. Goin' to be close work."

He was silent again, calculating his precious time and resources, without thought of our bruises or his own. The far margins of the salt prairie were smoking yet, little wisps of brown trailing up through the hot morning stillness. The woods of the *cheniere* to the north showed no sign of life. I was minded to tell him of what I had discovered, the camp of the black renegades about the mysterious wreck in the edge of the forest, and then, somehow, Laure's mute white face as she sat under the awning of the launch withheld me. Her eyes had appealed to me, I knew; and I kept a treasonable silence.

She had spoken but once and that was when the others were on the dredge looking over the damage.

"Am I a prisoner here?" she said faintly. "What will he do? What does he think?"

"He thinks you tried to ruin him; he thinks you even would do it unfairly—and that is what hurts him horribly."

"Hurts him?" She started. "Why, that? It is I who suffer!"

"You would not deny that you were in this plot to burn him out."

"Ah, no—I did not know that there were men in danger!"

"But his machine—everything he has staked his work—his pledge and honor on—you were willing to wreck it."

"Ah, as to that, he and his machine have not regarded me—they have gone on brutally for a year, without waiting for the law, so sure he was of beating me."

"Yes—he is quite sure. And I—I am a director in his corporation, mademoiselle."

She was staring at me in fear. "I did not know that. Messieur le Baron said: 'Ah, the doctor, he is a gentleman, a man of feeling and of sympathy. His heart is not with the mud-diggers!'"

"Ah, but my money is! And in this world, my dear," I sighed; I was sick of the affair. "Well, you had better not trifle with this man from Texas—in the end he will win."

She lifted herself higher on the seat to look at him upon his black leviathan: "He frightens me! That is why I—I—pretend!"

"To what?" I retorted, and she was pale and still. Then she went on subduedly: "You will not tell him what you saw last night. Listen, dear Doctor: it was absolutely necessary that he should not discover the wreck of that ship. And if his dredge went a

mile beyond, they certainly would discover it before we—we are done."

"Why are you digging out your grand-uncle's old slaver—what has that to do with it all?"

"It is the baron," she murmured. "He is a man of ideas, but he laughs and will not tell me all."

"He is a proper lord for John-the-Fool," I said. "I don't believe Virgil would bother about his digging, if that was all."

"It is not all," she cried. And then stared at her enemy who was coming along the embankment with his grimy engineer. Williams looked down upon her, small, resigned, trapped, but hostile; her eyes upon him now defiantly, as if challenging him to do his will; she would not beg a truce of him, or a favor, even so much as a glass of water in her deathly illness from the shock of his dynamite. It was Clell who ministered to her, brought her coffee after Mangy, our scared cook, had been retrieved from the marsh where he and the colored roustabout of the dredge had taken refuge. From the first Virgil had been absorbed in his machine; even now he dismissed her laconically.

"Take her around to Prosper's," he said to Big Jim; "say to the baron it was a fine pawty, thank

you. Give him our compliments, and say that any one of his niggers who sticks his head out of the grass within fou' hundred yards of our ditch is a dead nigger. We work with side-arms afteh this." Then he turned to Laure in her draggled gown that had seen the ball of Comus. "You see we're diggin' the ditch. We cain't stop to go man-huntin' in the deep swamp—othe'wise we'd be some mean to you' people. You go now—I know now what to ex-paict."

And his smile suddenly came, the old serene, self-assuring smile. "You see, I'm that kind of fel-lo—I fight fair. When I win, then I'll come to you and tell you what it means to me."

He sent her away with a brief order to the engineman to return at once for the trip to the city seventy-five miles to the north. She went stonily, without appeal or evasion; he could think what he pleased of her. Clell and I watched the issue in silence. The white launch sped back through the blackened prairie; and the boss turned into his hot, steamy engine-room to nurse, with the solicitude of a father, his loved and wounded beast of a machine.

I had an acute sense of outrage suddenly at him and the whole dogged business. Clell had stood

silently by under the boss' peremptoriness, grimly watching the other. It was as if they had waited for something, each in the other, that could be interpreted as weakness.

"She saved your life," I burst out hotly, "and for it got not even thanks!"

The Texan looked up from his broken gear. "Which?" And his eyes rested a moment on the other man.

"If you had seen her last night, fighting, crying her way through Isle Bonne swamps to get here first—to take *her* chance of destroying the dynamite scow before you had the madness to touch it—you would have known. And the way she stood up and clipped that stuff with bullet after bullet, taking her chance with the explosion, to save you—"

"I reckon it will do her good to think it oveh."

"You treated her infamously."

His smile came again. "All right. I'm playin' my game!"

The younger man listened; in his face of late had come something of the master's hardness, the brown clear skin lined deeper with what I had thought disdain, but now I wondered if it were not a joy of battle something like Virgil's own. Incessantly they

had watched, yet evaded each other; the place was an armed camp, but I, the onlooker, found it intolerable.

I got up and paced the floor. "The devil with you—both! I wish I had gone to Europe. I wish I had never volunteered for this, even for Mary. I wrote her so. I wash my hands of the affair—it is insufferable for a man of feeling and refinement. What do you fellows mean!"

They looked at me, and then at each other silently. The Texan arose and wiped the engine oil from his hands. Neither would answer.

"If this is all it comes to, you have failed," I went on. "You have made an abomination—a thing that will make your souls hateful."

My bronzed young friend looked clearly at me. And still he would not speak.

"I expaict my soul is mine," the Texan put in dryly, "and his is his." Then he turned his steady eyes upon the younger man. "I got another ordeh the last mail, from the boa'd, to lay up the dredge and paint and coveh—and abandon the option on that land beyond Isle Bonne. The boa'd is nervous again about that suit. I'm goin' to town now and I'll wire 'em to go plum' to hell. I'm runnin' this now, and this is the free state o' Barataria, and it

will take a bunch of gunmen to stop this work—directors or no directors. I cain't stop fo' a woman, either. It's the last gamble now. The hurricane months are comin' and the heat and lonesomeness, and bad water and short grub, maybe. Big Jim and me will go out and take the rousty with us. That leaves Mangy, the cook, and you—Redfield?" He looked patiently at the other man. "Hate me all you want—but are you goin' to stay on the job?"

"I'm going to stay on the job."

"The's two guns in the bunk-house," went on the boss irrelevantly. "The .303 automatic and the buck-shot gun. Cut loose at anybody that comes near—don't let the swamp niggers do any of this voodoo foolishness with Mangy and scare him off." Then he looked again seriously at his helper. "See here—last night this girl tried to get you to quit me, didn't she?"

"Yes."

The Texan's smile came. "Well, damn you! Hate me, man—I'm goin' out front to-day."

He turned to his packing in the forlorn bunk-house. When Big Jim returned from Prosper's they loaded some broken gears and pipe into the launch and set off on the seventy-five miles to the city. They would have to send east for the parts

and it would take ten days at best. Meantime Virgil would try to hire a crew for the night shift.

Big Jim had a pithy story to relate. "She cried," he said, "when we got clear of the canal and turned north into the lake—she looked back yere and then at the big woods on Isle Bonne, and cried. I let her cut loose all the way to Prosper's—damned if I'd sympathize."

But the boss looked thoughtful. Slowly the thing was getting to him. When he left he turned aside to me, as if to ease his spirit for a moment.

"I reckon you've gone over, Doctor. All right—I ain't askin' you none. You know what I told you about Laure once. I come as close to lovin' her as I want, but she cain't beat me—that's all. Only, somehow, with you-all, I have to stand fo' a good deal."

We watched the launch slip to the vanishing point of the canal behind us. To the dim blue wall of the forest northward, stretched the fire-riven prairie cane. A crow was calling lonesomely in the first of the dead cypress. Mangy, the cook, put his head out of the kitchen.

"It sho' gwine ter be a bad ten days yere, Misteh Redfield. Ah tell yo' befo' dey's nothin' but evil gwine ter come outen all dis diggin'. Yes, seh—

dem ole pirate folkses, dey done laid a curse on dis island—and den mah black people laid a curse on it, fo' ole Armand Drouillot, he drowned ninety slaves here once to keep de gove'ment from cotchin' 'em."

We sent Mangy back to his work with some hard words. The face of failure was enough to stare at without his African superstition. I knew Clell wanted me to stay with him at the dredge, but I had a feeling that he would resent my offer to do so. Besides I had a curiosity as to how the baron would explain the palpable work of his renegades—and their failure.

Clell and I sat down to a silent supper in the cook-house. Mangy shuffled in and out with his thick plates and cups over the creaking floor below which we heard the bilge water swash against the bulkheads. The mosquito hour had come, and our screened doors were gray with the humming horde against the last golden splash of the sunset. The "mosquito wind" off the dread La Fourche delta had blown all day. To stay outdoors was quite impossible.

"You can't get back to the baron's very well," observed Clell, "unless you wait till the mosquitoes quit this evening rush. All the same, Doctor Dick, I don't want you here. To stay all night, that is."

I stared at him somewhat incredulously; I had supposed that was what he secretly wanted but would not ask. "Why?" I muttered.

He raised his bronzed bare arm with a great gesture out to the scourge-ridden marsh and sky.

"Because I want to face it. I even wish the nigger was gone."

"Boy, what are you talking about?"

He was laughing now. "Oh, you won't understand. The thing's got me—that's all. That fellow—Williams—damn him! I just want to stand in his shoes a day and night and face it—the big failure. I've made it pretty mean for him—so's everything else. He stood the gaff—he's standing it now. He went off without a word, leaving his plant in my charge—and he knows I hate him—and could ruin him. Why, damn him—it's big!"

I looked at Clell silently.

"I could throw a monkey-wrench into some of his gear," he went on evenly, "and ruin him. Or a match into this oil waste." He rubbed his hard hands. "Look, Doctor Dick. Three months ago I was a lackey for a ten-million dollar trust—and never could get close enough to a man in it to know whether he was real or not. A big real man. That's

the fine thing down here. Things count. You can hate big—or love—”

He checked himself and his gaze grew long out of Mangy's sodden window at the splendor of that sky. “I was hoping he'd fail—just as I'd known failure. If I'd have seen a square way to ditch him I'd have done it. The city had screwed me up that way—to a hating tension. Why, I was sore because I couldn't get married on a dinky twenty-five a week—and stick at a dog-trot for the Amalgamated Electric the rest of my life!” He laughed sheepishly. “Married!”

“Well,” I said placidly, “there is not a deal in marriage that should interfere with one's happiness. But one must be the right sort to put up with it. You didn't surprise me, boy—I knew you had the stuff in you. But it's funny this thing is put up to you. Maybe you don't know how we are fixed—both Mary and myself—to say nothing of a lot more. I've got absolutely every dollar I possess sunk into Virgil's infernal land scheme. And Mary—”

“Doctor Dick!” he exclaimed.

“It's true. Mary and I—well, everything else failed Virgil the last two months. Besides what I

had in before—and all Mary's little fortune—and she's always put by a few thousand a year—I've cleared out of everything to keep this concern afloat. I hate to confess I'm a fool. The baron is right—only he doesn't know I'm a stockholder in Isle Bonne, or he'd challenge me again. I—well, confound you, boy—you're fighting for Mary and me, after all." I listened to Mangy scraping his last kettle for the night. "I believe—on my soul—we're all cleaned out. Only this fellow—Virgil—somehow, you can't help trusting him."

"Yes," Clell muttered, "that's what bothered me so long! I didn't want to. And now—"

"You see?"

"I roughed it a bit with him, I imagine. He's pretty square. His old affair with Mary—and then I came into her life. He got over that, and now he's picking up the man's load for us despite it all."

"See here," I retorted, "you say you hate him?"

"Yes." He made a grand flourish off to the outer world. "It's as great as love. I like the fellow's game, you see. He—he's smashed something out of me—some littleness, some failure, some bitterness. Mary's crowd—with their patter of cults and movements and uplifts—very fine, only I never was able to get under any man's skin. Then along

came Williams, and he hurt me down deep. Perhaps he saw I—I—had failed—with Mary and everything—perhaps he threw the iron into me purposely—sometimes I wonder? Oh, I couldn't bear his smile that night—pleasantly tolerant of us all! I didn't know he himself was backed into a ditch and fighting, too. He was the creator, fighting the sea back from a hundred thousand acres of the earth for other human beings to live on. I see now why he used to look on Mary's culture crowd as merely children—and me as a whimperer who imagined he was licked to begin with. Why, damn him, he shoved me into this, and the rougher it got, the more he smiled."

I could hardly conceal my wonder at him. "For Mary's sake," I murmured, and he looked quickly at me and shook his head.

"I'm all over that. I was jealous of him—but that's gone. Mary's free. I don't even care any more. I made good, you see; and Williams will have to see it. He—he's got to see it!"

I listened to the boy's desperate joy; he would wring this out of Williams in the end, the man's tribute to a man. I began to understand now. Only I thought of Mary's letters to me; a trifle wistful, a bit lonely. I had been commanded not

to show them to Clell, or mention her. I must let him forget if he would. But she wrote me: "You speak of the way Clell is making good in that wilderness—dear Dick, the wilderness is here—with *me!*" I was surprised at Mary. I had not thought she cared except in her superior fashion. She had an exasperating way of being always "right." That was what drove Clell away from her undoubtedly.

"See here," I put in on his exalted mood. "You said this island girl had tried to win you away from Virgil and the work here?"

"Well," he retorted, "can you blame her?"

"Not exactly. Only she can't be allowed to wreck things."

"No," he answered. "I told her that. It's queer how I stood up for Williams. She knows I hate him—not exactly why, but she guesses. She's pretty keen, Doctor. She isn't exactly the wild creature we supposed."

"Not at all. Blood will tell, the baron insists, and her line of adventuring ancestors were not fools, from all I understand. She can even speak decent English when she wishes; and with a gun—well you ought to see her."

"And her eyes—did you ever notice?"

I watched him for some time, and he was serious.

"I suppose you've guessed," I went on at length, "that Virgil loved her."

"Yes. He stood that, too, from me. His hands are tied—he can't make a move to defend himself with her. When the smash comes, and she loses her island, he will only be in worse. And here I am—standing by, waiting. And the girl is desperately turning for help somewhere. You see old Prosper's at the end of his string. He's had a couple of old Creole lawyers fighting his case all these years, and every now and then he'd mortgage a parcel of his land holdings to pay expenses. But now they see he'll lose, and they'll make trouble on the mortgages. And there sits Prosper and stirs his coffee—it's Laure that has to face matters. And her pride—her great pride—will be crushed when Virgil beats her—she'll never listen to him *then*." The boy muttered aside a moment: "But I—I'm here to help her at the finish—only—only—"

"Only what?" I retorted.

"Only—Williams. The fellow, you see, makes you want to play square with yourself. He's forever putting it up to me to make good—with myself."

"About the size," I answered, "of a man's size job, isn't it?"

## CHAPTER XII

### THE NAPOLEON OF THE NINE BEERS

I PADDLED my johnboat back up the shadowy water lane at midnight to the baron's as Clell had insisted. The boy, indeed, wished to face it alone. He, I saw, was playing a great game with himself, with his enemy, his love, the sky, the sea, the open—he was telling himself that he was a man and equal to things. A trifle Quixotic just now but sturdy, with the leap of new life and discovering youth. It was a great thing to saw him across such tough metal as Virgil Williams, I told myself. Mary was right, after all, to let them go. Mary, up there in the city that she had come to call her wilderness.

When I turned into the forest glade out of the saw-grass marsh a dim light was burning against the black woods of John-the-Fool. I drew up along the platform by the baron's house. The doughty beggar himself waved a vast arm from his red robe as he sat just within the door.

"It is late for you, my good Doctor," he began casually, as if nothing at all had happened in the last thirty hours.

"And most late for you to sit up—and alone, my good Baron," I answered.

"Alone? Not at all." He motioned to the low table by his chair and I saw an array of bottles and a hapless cake of ice melting in the midnight semitropic warmth. "Here sit I and the excellent beer. It is a treat, I assure you. Allesjandro brought a case and the ice from some La Fourche camp. Your glass, Doctor. I awaited you patiently. Beer at John-the-Fool is an event. Here I have sat and chased the puling universe down to a pin-hole, looked at it clearly and extended my congratulations to the Almighty. It is not a bad job for presumably His first attempt at creation. I am not altogether displeased, though He might have dispensed with the mosquitoes. I had my fling at it, my good Doctor." He chuckled out of his prodigious depths. "I thought it all over to-night—the great past of it, and what must come. I slapped the map of Europe together in half a dozen combinations; I put kings up here, and dynasties down there, and ran races over races and claptrap repub-

lics to the junk-heap. Eh, the mind I have—if I but had legs to match it! Napoleon was a dolt beside me.”

“By the bottles here, and empty, I must say you undoubtedly scourged half the world.”

“Ah, you have it! Nine, Doctor—and he who can not build his empire on nine beers will never do it on more.” He pulled on his pipe again until the bowl of it lighted half his shack. He sighed. “And now I sit at the edge of our isle and quarrel with you Yankees over a ditch of mud. Still, the great soul must have its quarrel—life would dry up for me overnight if I had nothing to scheme against—no cause to espouse, no sentiment to cherish, no love to exalt. Your infernal dredge is over-muddy for a clean man to combat, but it is better than drooling away in a chimney corner.”

“You made an excellent mess of your warfare last night, my dear Baron. To set your thieving blacks to fire the marsh while we were at your party was not Napoleonic.”

He grinned with the humor of a gargoyle under his great brows.

“I have had my first quarrel with my marquise over that.”

“She did not know, then?”

"The devil—no! That is—what the consequence might have been. You observe how she fled to stop it when she found your men were bound to walk into the pit of hell. Still, confound her conscience, we would have burned you out, if she had not had the wit to blow up your powder boat prematurely. To save their hides—that's the woman of it!"

"You confess to it easily," I murmured, wiping his beer from my mustache.

"To you, my dear Doctor. You are an arbiter as it were. A man of honor, of delicacy—even of chivalry."

"U-um," I murmured, and began casually to estimate just how deep I had gone, the last three months, as a stockholder into Virgil's Isle Bonne swamp lands company which this unsuspecting old cock would ruin if he could. Let him hang himself if he will, I thought; and then put a question to him abruptly.

"My dear Baron, why do you so fear the discovery of that ancient wreck of a schooner lying there in the edge of the deep swamp?"

He started with equal abruptness. "Of course," I went on indifferently, as if I knew all about it and cared less: "it's interesting as a relic, to our young friend of Isle Bonne—this sunken slave run-

ner of her great grand-uncle, Armand. Undoubtedly, you ought to dig it out; but why this secrecy? Mr. Williams, I assure you, would let your black men pump the hulk dry while his dredge worked peacefully past it. He has a mind that considers little back of last year's hurricane. And if it's really a piratical hull of Lafitte's day, and you expect to find treasure, as all the cajuns do—good! Mr. Williams would pronounce it very interesting, but he wouldn't stop his dredge even to cast an eye at it."

The old fellow nudged forward in his chair and tapped me with his pipe bowl. "He might well. There is a possibility—" then his brows contracted; his old eyes shone, his usual fat grimace came: "Well, let the fool dig—he's wasting an amazing amount of some one's money."

"Just what," I retorted, "do you mean?"

But the Baron John waddled up and away in his red robe, stopping however—although it was now two in the morning—to wind his execrable phonograph so that it was now bawling out *La Favorita* on the peaceful air. Once in bed he kept the time with his pipe as usual.

I retired quite disgusted at his utter frankness about his criminal schemes. He took me for grant-

ed. He was ever irritatingly sure of himself like an excellent card-player who can play fair and win, or nonchalantly stack the cards and lose, but fair or foul, remain equally composed, knowing that he has the odds against you in the end.

I promised myself that I would clear out of his lodge this week. The listening to all this posing and boasting, and then knowing the grim battle our fellows were having to keep the dredge at work, was getting on my nerves. I hadn't taken the baron's feud seriously before, and as for Papa Prosper's case in court against the transfer of Isle Bonne by the French heirs, why there was no chance for us to lose. It was hanging on to Virgil's option on the swamp beyond that was racking us all; to make it good he must complete his dredge contract.

But the next morning a deal of this resolve had gone. Laure of Isle Bonne had come over, as usual, bringing the greater part of that old scoundrel's breakfast. When his man Friday was absent, our saint of the woods was much taken with looking after the baron's household. She was rather distract this morning and greeted me with a pallid composure that led me to think she was not over her unnerving shock of two nights ago. There was a wound against her throat where bits of the débris

from Virgil's dynamite boat had struck her. She smiled over the baron's coffee. The old fellow was rather morose; I gathered that his beer had been a trifle green. When I happened to mention casually, that Williams had gone to the city they both started curiously.

"Then who is there?" asked Laure abruptly.

"Mr. Redfield and the cook," I answered. "And I shall keep him company."

They looked significantly at each other. Perhaps I had been a guest quite long enough. But it was not of that Laure was thinking.

I came upon her out on the platform looking off at the canal leading westward from the cove in the forest. One could make out a thin trail of smoke from the dredge stacks two miles away over the shimmer of marsh. And her study suddenly provoked me to boldness; it was always the most effective with our small enemy to startle her off her guard.

"See here, mademoiselle," I began, "ever since I told you my friend was alone there, you have seemed in a mood. Now, I warn you not to attempt any advantage of that."

She laughed outright; the first of that moody morning. "I, messieur? For what should I harm

that kind young man! He is my friend—all that he can be."

"That may be—in the sense that I am. All the same, we don't trust you. We know now, what you tried."

"I want to save my island."

"That's no way to do it. You might ruin Williams some way or other but your isle is in the hands of the court. And—" I added deliberately, "the case comes up this week for a last hearing on appeal."

She threw up her hands in utter anguish. I knew then what was torturing her. It shot over her expressive face, wave on wave of fear, grief, doubt and hatred for us all. "I knew, also," she murmured. "Ah, we were desperate. There is no one at home who cares. Papa Prosper, what does he do? Nothing! Stir his *café au lait* and say: 'Mebbe—mebbe,' this or that. Mebbe he get rich like a millionaire and then Isle Bonne?—Who care? Ah, I fled from it all and came to the baron! He is one man who can fight you!"

The Baron John Bernal De Vedrinnes was inspecting a patent tip from one of his nine bottles; he sighed lugubriously—the beer had been too unripe by far, for empire-building.

"Why fight us, my dear young lady? You are perfectly mad. Your whole scheme is absurd. Laws, courts, injunctions—evictions—records—all that sort of thing is the way men fight nowadays. Why plots and poniards and all that? The Baron is daft. Who are your attorneys in the city?"

"Ah, *mon Dieu*—I don't know! What for I know lawyers? The baron, he say—"

"You poor child—" began I, in real commiseration, forgetting our dilemma in her own. Then she turned angrily on me. "I wish I had let it blow up!"

"But you didn't. You mercifully and courageously let Mr. Williams live to work another day."

"Do not mention him!"

"He's gone to the city—and he'll bring men and machines more than ever," I retorted. Then continued placidly: "Why don't you come over and look at his diabolical machine that you hate so well?"

She looked long at it. "Very well. I never have been near it. It's a monster, tearing the heart out of my beautiful forest. We will go see."

I followed her as she stole out of the glade in her running pirogue. The baron had closed his

eyes and was sighing over another bottle of his too-green beer—an unopened one, this time.

It was a long hot pull in that silent grass-hung canal to the dredge at the end of it. We passed the blackened area, and then the torn embankment where the dynamite boat had gone up. The wood saint laughed. "*Bom!* Do you remember the noise, Doctor?" Then she fell silent, and I had hard work keeping up with her canoe stroke, so sure, so easy, so elusive the quick strength with which she drew the pirogue through the water. We drew up at the greasy deck of the dredge. Clell was testing some lubricants in the engine-room and did not see us until Laure darkened the door. Then he gasped his amazement. He extended a grimy hand.

"It is honest dirt on there," he said smilingly.

"But mine—from off my isle, messieur. I suppose you will make a pretty speech now, and say I can have it back—with the hand." She turned to look up in the black space around the drums and boilers, and her assurance seemed going. She was in the enemy's camp, and it spoke grim power and brute purpose against her fancies. Somehow my provoking sympathy for her would arise; so I turned

into the hot little office and pretended to be absorbed in the blue-prints on Williams' desk, leaving them out on the deck among the machinery in that silence of the noon swamp.

"After this," she went on slowly. "We can not pretend to be friends—none of us, at all. He—he will not trust me any more; and I—I will hate him more than ever."

"You splendid little fighter! I—oh, well—I wish I could help you. This Williams—I hated him, too, Laure. Only, he wore it out, someway. I wish you had never refused his compromise. It's too late now, but that forty thousand dollars he made the company offer you—"

*"Jamais—jamais!* No—we shall go away! Messieur le Baron, he say we shall go to France—to Bordeaux—and he will shake his fist at my cousin there who sold out the property; we shall go to Paris, to Vienna, St. Petersburg—always the baron say he shall roar and shake his fist and denounce Yankees. Messieur le Baron say, first I must have a little hat, all pearls and danglets like we saw in a magazine, which will make me look dangerous like a Russian spy of royalty—and then to Europe we shall go, and never shall Messieur le Baron cease to denounce Yankees and lawyers and diggers of mud."

"He is a magnificent fool, Laure."

"That is the only kind to be. It is better than digging mud or talking seed catalogue for cabbages like Papa Prosper. Messieur le Baron say he will take me to the palace of his cousin, the Prince of Thurn—he say in the prince's garden there are no mosquitoes like Isle Bonne."

"And no wonderful sunsets shining back from the pools in the forest, and from the lakes when you cross in the little green pirogue; and there will be no wild garden such as Prosper's where you are free. You will have many things, perhaps—gowns and people and sights, but you will want to come back to your island some day."

"Be still," she whispered. "My island—and *he* is taking it."

The young man was silent; then he went on, for she seemed stricken with grief at last, and had not her usual blithe defiance: "I know. But if you could see—what he sees? The Isle Bonne lands again reclaimed from the sea—and the homes and farms on what your family abandoned long ago to desolation—how beautiful *he* would make it. I can see it, Laure, and I—I—hated him."

"I know," she said. "That is the strange thing. And you cared for me a bit—and yet would not help me."

"There was the man's game," he answered.  
"That was the big thing."

"Ah, that is the way it goes!" She sighed, her light step sounded forward, and she was unloosening the tie-line of her green canoe. She had not won him from his grudged loyalty. To me, listening, that was the fine thing, the rugged love he was finding for the chief despite himself; women were well enough, but this was greater, the man's stuff, in him.

I heard her speak again above the stroke of her paddle: "Suppose there was danger? M'sieu, would you come? Could I call you?"

"From the ends of the earth! Only, what do you mean, Laure?"

The little green pirogue had slipped along in the shadow of the rozo cane; she turned to look back with a sad smile.

"But when it came I should have to call on one who loved me!"

He watched her go, staring after her in doubt at her new moods. She was admitting sorry defeat after her long defiance.

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE OLD PIRATE HEAD

I CAME back to the idle dredge boat the next day, after a rather perplexing night at the baron's. I had spent it alone. It was the first time the rotund knight had not awakened under his mosquito netting and bawled for Allesjandro to fetch the early coffee. I wondered at this absence. Allesjandro's pink and blue lugger, which had lain yesterday in the cove of the flooded forest, must have been poled out the canal to the tidal lakes during the night, and the master with it. Neither did Laure come stealing through the Isle Bonne swamps in her pirogue from the other side of the island. "That proves," I reflected, "that something was planned by the two. Something is up in this dolorous warfare."

I made my own coffee, and then put off to Williams' dredge two miles in the shimmery marsh. It was a fair breezy morning with the whisk of white clouds up from the gulf; one could almost catch the tumult of the surf on those outer reefs.

Clell hailed me from the craneman's nest up on the arm of the derrick which swung idly above the steel "clam-shell" digger. The first impression was of his loneliness; the murky little kitchen was deserted.

"Mangy's cleared out!" Clell hailed me blithely. "The first night alone was too much for his nerves. And I can't understand it. He came in the bunk-house after I'd turned in, his eyes big and white as saucers and said to me: 'Deh gib me mah wahnin', Marse Clell! No place fo' a riveh niggeh hyeh.' I asked him what was the matter and he started to tell me again that wild yarn he always relates about the ghost-head which is bad for niggers. His mother once landed on Isle Bonne to start a moss-picking camp, and first night at supper a big old hairy head came plump down on the table before her. The old lady grabbed the head and threw it out the door and the piccaninnies went on with their supper. First thing the old ghost head was back kerplump on the table. Old lady slams a frying pan down on it, and yells: 'G'way from here, yo' Ole Pirate Haid—yo' cain't fraid me out dis island!' Mangy says he remembers well: 'Ole Pirate Haid jes' winks and hump eround the table, and growls

first at one piccaninny and then another, and finally jumps and hit Mangy in the eye. Yes, sir, Mangy remembers it all and he was only two years old. His mammy jumps up and hits the Old Pirate Haid a clout, and the Old Pirate Haid he jumps on the floor and trips her up, and then knocks the lamp over, and the camp burns up and all the niggers take to their boats and beat it. They see the Old Pirate Haid sitting up in the moss of a big cypress grinning at them.'

"So last night, Mangy pokes his head in my room and tells me he done see the Haid again. It stuck itself up out of the marsh across the ditch and roll its eyes at him something fierce. Mangy says he was too scared to call for me; he just had a fit. I swore at him and ragged him and he went into the bunk-house mumbling. And this morning he was gone—cleared out, God knows where. Didn't take a boat, and he must have plunged right off in the marsh. If he did, he's a dead nigger by now."

"Maybe," I answered interestedly, "the Old Haid has got him."

"I imagine—only we'd have heard him yell a mile. The point is that Laure and the baron have got another one. It's tough, Doctor Dick, for we can't

live without a cook." Then he burst out laughing. "I wish the old cock-fighter would spring something like that on me!"

"He's gone, too," I answered still more interestedly, for things seemed coming to a point. "So's Allesjandro's lugger, and Laure, apparently, for she didn't come over with the baron's breakfast. But what are you doing up there?"

"Taking another look for that fool, the cook. Promised Williams I'd keep him if I had to use a gun. But he slipped me."

We scanned the wall of cypress along the marsh where the last white dead trunk standing out in the salt pools marked the retreat of the forest before the encroaching gulf. And while we were discussing the matter and the superstitions of the deep swamp blacks concerning the slave runners' island, there came somewhere off on the stillness the distinct boom of an explosion. We stopped dead in our tracks, the sound was so clear cut in that hot morning air.

And then Clell raised his hand. "There—do you see?"

I marked a faint brown haze against the distant woods, a mere patch on the blue wall, but at once I noted that it lay fair upon the spot where Armand

Drouillot's slave ship had broken herself in the fifties. We heard the rumble dying away in the recesses of Isle Bonne.

Clell had come to me excitedly. "Do you recall what Laure said last night?—of danger!"

"Yes. Only this. Well, there is something I haven't told you."

"Inside?" He motioned to the island. "You haven't told *us*!"

"Well, I didn't want to spin any yarn about a sunken treasure ship of Jean Lafitte, and have it turn out to be a Barataria oyster boat come ashore over the marshes on some tidal wave. But there is a wreck in there, with three of the baron's outlaw niggers working at it. They have been the ones who scared Virgil's niggers away, and now they've got Mangy undoubtedly."

"Digging? For what?"

"How can I tell? I never mentioned it. Virgil would smile at that sort of a yarn. Only Laure knows—it belongs to one of her slave-running ancestors. And they're digging in it—that's why they've tried to obstruct the dredge, only I can't quite see the use of it."

My young friend was staring at me. "And you never told me! The baron—he's back of it."

"Exactly. I've heard him boast of it. As it's a harmless diversion, I didn't bother. And now I think likely they've blown it up."

Clell ran his fingers through his hair worriedly. "See here—we ought to look into that. There might be something in it."

"There is—mud and shells. The old hulk was burned to the water's edge apparently and filled with stuff by the storms. I put down the affair as another bombastic hallucination of Baron John's—he was always winking an eye at me over some mysterious trick or other."

"But Laure—" Clell went on. "I think we ought to know. She was sad enough last night. She—appealed—almost appealed to me for help, at least, I fancied so."

"What can we do particularly?"

"Go in to-night. I am enough of a swamper now. We can take the small launch and go around by Bayou L'Ourse—Big Jim and I scouted out a channel one Sunday that leads in deep."

"You'll never make it," I retorted. "And they're bad niggers."

"That's just it. What should she be doing leading a gang like Hogjaw and Doc Crump? The baron would be a joke in protecting her. I be-

lieve now, she needed us and was too proud to ask of her enemies."

I thought as much. And I wondered at Clell's ardor and more at his initiative. He had come to a new marauding manhood of late; and I wondered also, if he loved the girl? There was Mary—but then, with men, love is a curious thing. I have seen it wrecked by an underdone pie and a neurasthenic stomach. There is one's soul, of course, but then women have never proved their contention as to that and love.

So I assented. Clell would have gone in alone. We talked over a number of ways to penetrate the swamp island. Bayou L'Ourse was an unmarked channel winding in from the shallow inner reaches of the tidal lakes through the swamp isle, which scattered itself in numberless reedy pools and cypress-spiked sloughs and finally reached the outlying marshes somewhere near the place where we thought the old hulk lay. We determined to go in from that side, though it meant a *détour* of many miles. Directly across from us to the forest edge the *flottant* was impassable, a bottomless mire hedged over with a thin crust of grassy peat over which a man could not walk and through which he could not paddle.

I questioned the expediency of leaving the dredge unguarded. Many eyes might be watching us from the forest rim.

"That is exactly what we want," retorted Clell, "they will never dream that we would leave the big machine unprotected after what happened. And if they have a lookout lest we spy on them, he will merely watch the canal and marsh."

That seemed true enough. So we got away at sunset down the long hot canal which was a ribbon of red and yellow in the bordering green. We stole past the cove of John-the-Fool with some trepidation, but the pool in the forest was silent. The white bar at the baron's bed fluttered idly in the doorway. Not even the lone dog was upon the platform, and Allesjandro's lugger had not returned from the lakes. The silence, the sense of expectant desertion was mysterious. I had never known the old fellow to be away a night since my vagabond sojourn with him.

We rowed the small motor skiff for miles past Isle Bonne woods so that the sound of the engine would not attract the enemy. It was thick dark when we passed Virgil's forlorn site for his pumping plant. On the black earth space lay his piles of lumber, the cement slowly changing to stone

under the flimsy corrugated sheds, the costly pumps and turbines under the hastily constructed shelters he had been able to improvise when the order to quit the construction had come last autumn. Clell stood up and sighed in the starlight as he poled past the dim ghost of failure.

"The old chief," he murmured, "I guess it is tough. Whichever way he looks from that dredge arm, forward or back, he sees something that ought to be done—and he helpless to do it. Only the dredge he fought onward—personal and specified—and now it's blocked. How many weeks has he to complete the ditch in?"

"Nine, I should imagine—if he could start right off. He told me it was a forty-foot cut to the big cypress and then thirty after the turn for the outer reef. It must be five miles or so but it will be better going when he gets away from the forest edge into softer stuff."

"He'll never make it," Clell muttered: "This last delay—when they broke his machine—will be his finish, Doctor Dick."

"Well," I retorted, with some philosophy, "then your Uncle Richard will begin again to sell medicine on the road—that's what this imbecility has done to me. And Mary's little money—well, now

I see why Virgil's eyes seem haunted of late. I thought it was Laure."

Clell mused idly over the oars. "Do you suppose he cares that much?"

I disliked to bring that matter up. The two had ennobled the hate that they had brought to the south woods by a common danger and a common loyalty. It was a shame if two such fellows faced again across the gulf which their manhood had slowly bridged.

"He gave up much for you," I muttered shortly. "And now—well, it seems that there is nothing for him except to go on earning the hatred of the girl he loves. And you—allowing you to stand by and profit by it all. Still, he says nothing—fights on as grim as his black monster of a machine that is eating the heart out of her island. I wonder at him."

"I wonder what he would do if he were free—if he hadn't brought your money, Doctor Dick; and Mary's money—and all the stockholders' money into the scheme? He's got to ruin you all, it seems—or ruin Laure and her island. Do you suppose the girl sees it that way?"

"A lot she would care! The company is a Yankee abomination to her. She doesn't want the land

reclaimed, nor a furrow turned nor a house built—she wishes her wilderness to go on as it is."

"That is the beautiful thing about her," Clell retorted. "She loves it so! And as far as this gabby old guy of a baron is concerned she doesn't take much stock in him, I fancy. He puzzles her, that's all—naturally, too, with his ranting about dukes and flunkies, fortunes and family trees. What girl wouldn't be interested?"

"She believes him implicitly."

"Get out!" Clell answered. "She's too much sense. He contributes to her play-world, and a very fine play-world for a child who had nothing to dream of except Isle Bonne. He's created a real mimic war for her, and made himself the succoring knight. It's bully, but it can't last."

"And after the baron, you expect to be her knight, I suppose?"

He laughed light-heartedly. "I'm waiting for the smash-up. And my freedom from Williams. Then —well, all through Williams has been pretty square; so, I must be, also, Doctor Dick!"

And that was what I loved in him. It sweetened one's pipe, and made the mosquitoes less annoying.

We got out of the long miles of canal at last

and the launch lay in the star-smitten waters of the lake. The engine gave some trouble and it was ten o'clock when we got up along the dim shore toward Isle Bonne. After a while one saw the white shell ridges under the oak fringe, and then the *cheniere*—the higher bit of land on which was Prosper's house. It had been a week since we were there at the ill-fated island ball. I wondered what Papa thought of it all as I stood on that narrow border between lake and jungle in the clumps of Spanish bayonet. Clell was wading and stumbling among the cypress spikes; at length he called impatiently that we must have come too far and passed the mouth of the inlet to the swamp.

And at his voice I heard a laugh. It was near, so near that I involuntarily stooped to scan the beach, and then I saw a figure against the starlight. Slender, evasive, then it moved and I knew it was no man. She came closer intently, and I reached out a hand from the bayonet clumps and touched Laure. She started with an exclamation; then seemed to recognize me.

"M'sieu! Yes—it must be you—I saw you a moment ago!"

"What are you doing here?" I murmured.

"Merely—well, spying on you."

“I imagine.”

She looked at Clell intently, then whispered. “You must not try this—going in the deep swamp, Messieur le Doctor. Things are bad—bad—and you could not find your trail, anyway.”

“He will try at least.” I indicated my angry young friend in the cypress, now sinking and twisting at the beginning of the morass.

She laughed again softly. “No, he will not. I have stolen your boat.”

“Laure!”

She was moving away from me as if fearing capture. “So that you can’t get in. It must not be—it is dangerous. The black men, they—they are angry.”

“At you and the baron?”

“At every one. They thought—well, I can not tell you. Only you must not go. I followed to prevent”—she was moving away and called back in a whisper. “Do not tell him, dear Doctor! He is different from you—he is not a reasonable person.”

Clell was splashing out angrily berating the obstructions and cutting himself on the cruel bayonet edges as he reached the shell beach. Laure hastened swiftly back to me and took my hand.

“Remember—you are my friend—you will not

tell them! You will not hinder us—it is our—*my*—last chance, dear Doctor! For my island!"

Then she was gone, her soft step on the shells lost in the heavy grind of Clell's boots breaking through the jungle, her form melting in the star blur over the still lake. I stood there, sighed and lighted my pipe. The matches were damp, of course, and I was scratching a second when Clell reached me.

"It's no go. I suppose I'm not a good swamper yet, but I'd swear this was the place. But one can't make it ten yards on foot—it's simply bottomless. We'll go start the launch and run along shore."

"U-um," I mused, and lighted another match. We went along the ridge in the starlight and presently my friend stopped.

"Doctor Dick, the boat's gone!"

"Amazing!"

"Here's where we left her. Here's the mark of her keel—she's gone!"

"By jove! Impossible!" I stared down at that mark in the shells.

He looked at me in some suspicion; I am a bad actor. "Doctor Dick, is it possible you stood here and *they* could steal the launch?"

"Confound the matches!" I was busying trying to light my pipe.

"Did *she* take it—and you wouldn't chase her?"

"My dear boy, I will not chase a woman under any circumstances. At my age—"

He shut me up angrily. "Somehow, you take it too calmly. Don't you realize we're marooned on this reef—a half-mile long and thirty feet wide—the lake on one side, the swamp on the other. Not a house except Papa Prosper's—and wouldn't we look like fools going there?"

"Undoubtedly. But that is just where we shall go. Papa rises at four for his early coffee—it is past three now. We shall be just in time for Papa's excellent morning coffee. And at seven—breakfast—ah, the excellent shrimp fricassee one gets at Papa's!"

He shook his fist at me. "I don't understand you. We are two first-class fools—and Virgil will discover it. That's what hurts me!"

We tramped down the beach in the warm starlight. I was trying to solve the crisis in Laure's mystery of the jungles. Traitor I undoubtedly was to our fellows, to the Meadows Land Company and my own pocketbook. And yet—somehow I wanted

Laure to have her fling; it would end for her and her fat knight soon enough, I imagined. Only, what was the danger from which she would shield us to-night?

Clell stopped once and stared at me. "They know we are trapped on this side of the island. Do you suppose they will harm the dredge?"

"She will fight fair now," I retorted.

"But the niggers?"

"The blacks are interested in but one thing—and that is the reward the baron has promised them for digging out that old wreck. At least I think it that way. Besides there is Laure, and her trick with that rifle of hers is marvelous. She will not allow them."

"Then what?" he queried. "Why maroon us here?"

"To keep your fool neck out of trouble. I believe—on my honor—the girl is now fighting for us—do you understand that?"

He shook his head. "To save Virgil's machine," I went on. "To fight fair, despite all of them. Even to lose Isle Bonne, because—she'd rather lose her island than lose our good opinion. There is one of us, you see, whom she loves!"

"Doctor Dick," he retorted: "Is it you, or I?"

"Play fair," I answered beguilingly. "You must, you know. It's in the compact—the three of us. Now let's find a way out of this bad hole. We New York fellows are all very well on the asphalt, but we ought not go in the deep swamp and expect to outwit them. I see it now perfectly. You recall that I was reluctant—"

He cut me off with an angry whoop up at Prosper's gallerie which we could make out whitely under the oaks. Again and again he shouted, and then went up the steps. The doors, as usual, in this innocent land, were tight shut to keep out the mosquitoes, and the chimneys wide open to let them in. Not a window glass nor a screen was in the mansion. Clell rattled the casing.

Presently out came Papa Prosper's head, sleepily, and then with amiable surprise.

"Ah, messieur! Me—I hear a noise!"

"We're stuck on the *cheniere*. Some of your people stole our boat."

Papa paddled to his door and threw the great bars. He turned up his dim lamp and stood scratching his head.

"We want to get away—back to the dredge," went on Clell impatiently. "Damn it all, man—did—who did this?"

"Ah, dis worl'!—she is too much. Me—I go fo' nuttin' lak dat. You' boat, he get stole? Ah, what infamy!"

"Is your granddaughter—Laure?—is she here?"

"Me—I don't know. All a-time mademoiselle she go fo' honey bees!"

"Bees—nothing. It's almost dawn."

"Sho' is. Neve' I see honey bees get up so soon as did bees on Isle Bonne! Coffee, m'sieurs?—she mak dis life."

Clell turned away and stared into the first pink of dawn over Isle Bonne woods. Northward the films of mist showed on the water. The mosquitoes were singing in Papa Prosper's honeysuckle. Papa himself was busied at his charcoal stove and coffee dripper.

We two sat on the galleries and watched the last of the Drouillots kneeling lean-shaken in his pajamas to fan his charcoals. His fine old grizzled face was demure as a maiden's. Amiably he lit a cigarette and sighed up at us.

"All dis worl', she have mooch trouble except me, messieurs. Me—I don't go fo' nuttin'. Coffee on my gallerie, messieurs, and dat breeze off my sweet isle—all-a-time livin' jus' lak a millionaire—me."

We sighed also, regarding that decadent happy

gentleman of the pirate's line. Never would he question what we muddy adventurers were doing on his shell beach in darkness; never would he stir a malevolent suspicion of any one into his morning coffee. Clell sighed again and scanned the untenanted lake with its sunken shores, the green gray wall of forest behind us, all dawn-sweet and shot with sun's gold through its cathedral plumes above the mirrored pools.

And while we wearily sat against the gallerie rail and waited for the coals to heat, there came again the sound of an explosion in the heart of Laure's isle. The reverberations reached through the still glades and out over the lakes and passes like thunder of the hurricane month.

"There!" cried Clell. "Again! I tell you, Doctor Dick—we've got to be in on that—whatever they're blowing up!"

Papa Prosper paddled along, stirring his thick decoction. "Whateve' go up, she must come down, messieurs. All-a-time—all-a-time, messieurs. Coffee on my gallerie, messieurs? Coffee—dis sweet mawnin'—just, lak a millionaire."

Ah, happy Prosper! I stirred my sugar in, and waited for something to come down—just lak a millionaire.

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE TURN OF FORTUNE

OVER the coffee we diligently tried to ferret information out of Papa Prosper as to doings in the deep swamp. We learned, for our pains, that cucumbers did not do at all well in the black earth of the *cheniere*. Papa had planted one in 1883, and then had retired to his galleries to reflect upon the vanity of government seeds and the worl' in general. "Me—I write my good friend, M'sieu Le Blanc, who is in dat Congress. I say: 'What-all a-matter with yo' government? Is it no fo' nuttin I plant dem seeds on my island?' I say to my good friend: 'Messieur Le Blanc, some-a-time yo' see dat Prasident yo' say to him: "My friend Messieur Prosper Drouillot, he say yo' seeds not so much." Ah—me!" sighed Papa, "dis worl', he is strange!"

Clell murmured his despair. The long gray shadows over the lake shortened until the sun glanced down with mid-morning splendor into Prosper's odorous garden-pool behind the house. The

honey bees droned away into the forest isles; the tree-frog sang in the eaves spout; Papa sat on his gallerie and waited to be a millionaire. And not a sign of life showed over the swamp lake, nor from the flooded woods; the silence of Isle Bonne might not have been disturbed for a century for all appearances.

"I'd give a month's pay to know what they're doing back there," Clell muttered. He went down the shell ridge trying to discover the pirogue trail by which Laure entered the forest. It was not even blazed; a novice could not have entered a hundred feet without being bewildered by the sunless depths, the tangle of fallen trees and creepers, the cypress spikes, the giant ferns and palmettos growing here, there, on rotted logs above the water.

My young friend came back impatiently and stuck his wet high boots up on Prosper's gallerie rail. "If I had as much as a loose log, I'd try to paddle around the island, Doctor Dick!"

I sleepily dissuaded him from such folly with the heat of high noon nearing. Out of his thrilling past Papa dug adventures for our entertainment.

"My cou't, wan time she sit here, m'sieu. On dis gallerie—so. Beeg yelleh lady from Temple *Cheniere* she come testify in my cou't. Some leetle

dog, he got stole. All dem people from Temple *Cheniere*, come soon—soon in mawnin, and me—I have to get out and mek coffee fo' all dem witnesses. Dat leetle dog, he eat some too. I tie dat leetle dog to my rain barrel, and I say to all dem witnesses: ‘Now, what-a-matteh? What fo' all yo' come and mak me hold dis cou't?’

“Beeg yalleh lady, she talk soon—soon. Odder lady, she talk soon—soon. Me—I sit here and I couldn’t get no fo’ nuttin out of dat Indian gumbo dey talk. I say: ‘Lady, all about dis leetle dog in dat kind of talk dis cou't, he can’t say.’

“Beeg yalleh lady, she say: ‘Ah, Papa, you ol’ son-of-a-gun—yo’ shut up!’

“M’sieu, what yo’ think of dat beeg yalleh lady?”

“I hope,” I put in sympathetically, “you upheld the dignity of the court?”

“I sho’ did, m’sieu. I say to dat beeg yalleh lady: ‘So—so! Yo’ talk dat way to dis cou't?’ Me—I sho’ upheld the dignity of dis cou't—I tell dat beeg yalleh lady she wan son-of-a-gun, too!”

The tree-frog was yelling again, and the court languidly flicked a mosquito. Justice had been done, and Papa rolled another cigarette. And the long broody heat of the south coast summer day was on us. Every one slept on Papa Prosper’s gallerie,

except the tree-frog. I drowsed in my chair. Clell, also, had settled back dead tired after the night's perplexities. Papa had gone entirely; his limp socked foot thrust into the honeysuckle masses. That was the last I knew. Then came oblivion. I dreamed that the Board of Directors of the Prairie Meadows Land Company was sitting about its mahogany table as a High Court on the Beeg Yalleh Lady, and that I and the Leetle Dog were tied to the table legs as material witnesses. The High Court decreed that the three of us were to be consigned down, down through endless and increasing layers of heat—down, down, through blistering caverns of chaos to the last pit—Me and the Dog and the Beeg Yalleh Lady; and then suddenly Virgil Williams looked over the rim of Hades, threw us a line and yelled that it was his business to pull us back—personal and specified. Which he did.

And I started up with a gasp to find the two o'clock sun fair on my head. I was stung and lathered with perspiration; and sat up, still gasping, to stare straight at Virgil Williams leaning thoughtfully against the gallerie rail looking at me. Even in my amazement I noticed, on his bronzed lean face, in his deep worn eyes, a great soft joy—a triumph.

"You see," he began, as if I was guessing at it—"we won!"

"Won—man?"

"Cou't. Appeal decided for us on all points." He came across the gallerie and took my hands. "Big—Doctor Dick! By Mighty, the big fight's done! We'll get our bonds taken up now—we can slap a quarter of a million dollars into the work in thirty days. I got busy in the city—I started 'em—those New York fel-llos! I wired for the new machines to come a jumpin'—three new, two-yard dredges that we ordered a year ago and couldn't pay for. And the men—Big Jim's in the city bu'stin' things open on the levee. In thirty days, Doctor Dick, you'll see Isle Bonne cut to the sea!"

I was on my feet shaking hands again. My two companions at the gallerie end were still at their siesta. Williams had hardly noticed them. Never had I seen him so exalted.

"Six years—stawms and failure and loneliness," he said and his high smile came. "And your money, I got into it, Doctor Dick—and Mary's and all of 'em. Neveh hit me till now what a load I been carryin'." He wiped his brow, and his level glance went to the wilderness behind us. "'Membehi what I told you once when I showed you the marsh?

That lone settler's shack—that fel-lo that bought his forty acres, and took one look at it and then blowed his head off? And in his shack I found the little baby wagon with his pink side-winders?"

"I remember."

"Yes, seh. Three years from now his swamp will be a gyarden, and the black soil that Old Mississip' has been pouring down here fo' fifty centuries off the best of the whole country—why, from here to the gulf you'll see orange trees and almonds, and figs and truck and corn—and little homes and shade trees. And we'll build a hotel to bring the no'then land-seekers to, and in it we'll put that little baby cart with the pink side-winders just to show 'em—and tell 'em about the first lone martyr who shot himself when he saw what he'd bought—the sifted son-of-a-gun!" He laughed in his great pathos for the other: "But no one'll ever guess what I fought through—personal and specified—to make a gyarden smile out of this wilderness!"

"Well—well—" I stammered. I could not answer him; his triumph was too splendid. I saw a very new cabin launch out at the edge of the dazzling shells, the brightwork on her with the glitter of gold. Some one was under the awning, but I could not make out. I turned again to Virgil.

"But why did you come first to Isle Bonne?"

He made a gesture to Prosper's sleeping form. "To tell 'em!" His voice lowered, his smile deepened. "Papa—and that old dog—the baron. And clean their shootin', sneakin' niggers off our island. And Laure—" He stopped softly. After the silence, he sighed: "Only that is what bothers me. Laure—I told you long ago I loved her, Doctor Dick."

I nodded. I wondered slowly, how he loved her. He, the silent fighting man, watching always her fear and hatred of him deepen, it seemed. Never could he speak; there was the trust that others had given him, there were the pledges he had made at the beginning. The man's size job—it had bulked between him and her always; never a word could he speak while he had watched the other man attracting Laure's fancy with his graces.

It seemed now that he guessed my pity. His slow smile came again.

"All right. The big fight's done. I'll have to tell her she's lost—just as I always told her. Just like I pleaded with her to compromise the case years ago and take the forty thousand we offered. She could have had it then, but now—well, the company withdrew that when her lawyers fought

'em to a finish. They ransacked all the old records in N'Awlyins and in France, too, I reckon, tryin' to find the old Spanish grants that they said gave it to Prosper's line of the family. Prosper"—his benign eye fell upon Papa's ear sticking out from under the newspaper—"reckon if I wake him up and tell him the news, he'll only just look in his seed catalogue!"

"And you came here—to tell Laure—*first?*"

"It's only square. I—I—she cain't hate me always—if she sees I'm always square. She'd never been so bitter if it wasn't for the baron—he made her hate me. Why, the old rooster—I'll ship him cross-lots to Kingdom Come this week. I got a bunch of deputies comin' with our new niggers—gunmen, too. They'll hunt Crump and Hogjaw and Doc Fortune off Isle Bonne woods in a week. I'll be too busy."

"I think," I murmured, with a qualm at my deceit: "they're busy also."

He laughed softly. "I reckon. The baron's some boy fo' treasueh! He can have it. But his niggers got to go. Big Jim's bringin' five deputies—gun-toters we picked up and had deputized fo' this. Sheriff said neve' mind de-tails. Only—Laure—" he mused again. "Well, it's got to be

done—we're on the job now. I can't stop fo' women." Then the patient pain deepened in the lines of his face: "But she—wondeh what she'd say if she knew that I was the one men called the *dreameh?*"

"She is awakening," I retorted. He stared at me. Clell was rolling over on his gallerie bench. The boss' eyes were on him as he sat up.

"Redfield—thought I left you at the machine?"

Clell came to him quietly. "It was my fault. I thought there was something going on in the island —something that put her in danger. So I persuaded Doctor Dick to come and try to get in with me, and they stole our boat and marooned us here. It—it was for her," he finished stubbornly but without malice, and it was the longest speech he had addressed to Williams in all the dispiriting months. "You see I don't think she'll harm the machine. She was there—she quite gave her word."

The boss looked wonderingly. "Yes?"

"You see, she'll play right now," went on Clell soberly. "Doctor Dick has sized it up—there's one of us she cares for."

The Texan did not answer. But I put in languidly: "Me—undoubtedly. You see I am the one

who has amused her mightly. My dear chaps—you lose."

I said it well. They stared incredulously, but mystified. Then the Texan shook his head: "Sho'—Doctor Dick! I told you long ago"—then he stopped and looked at the younger man patiently: "Well, what's the use? I expaict I've no call fo' women. She'll hate me now—fo' I beat her. Isle Bonne is ours. The cou't gave us every point—clean."

"You won?"

"Yes—and she'll have to know. The Supreme Cou't ended it fo' her. The French heirs held the real titles. Prosper and his dad—and his grand-dad before him—they were all a bunch of squatters. And we got our title confirmed abroad."

Clell was silent. Prosper was stirring his coffee upon the table.

"You heard what I said, Papa?" the Texan continued. "I just dropped around to tell you—you' lawyers will let you know next."

"Ah, dem lawyehs, m'sieu! All-a-time I tell Mademoiselle Laure: 'Whaffor dem lawyehs? *Le Bon Dieu*'—He mek dat sun shine, and our leetle isle, she is green and shady, and all-a-time yo'

honey bees, mademoiselle, can not yo' hear yo' honey bees? Ah, dat worl'—what is he fo' yo', Laure? Wan green leetle island, he is yo's.””

We seemed stilled by that gentle voice. Prosper's languid eyes went out to Laure's wilderness. The mirrored day lay in her wondrous lake. The sky was flecked by tiny scales of white rimmed with gold drifting up from the gulf as they might have done to lure her buccaneer ancestors from their lawless trafficking to Isle Bonne's peaceful shore.

“But I tell you,” went on Virgil slowly, “that you've lost.”

“M'sieu?” Prosper inquired gently still. “How can dat be?”

“The court—”

The descendant of the gentlemen of Carondelet's time shrugged: “All dis of cou'ts—fou'ty years now, m'sieu, have I heard of cou'ts—so long my grandfather's cousin in Bordeaux he been in cou't fo' Isle Bonne. All-a-time I say to Mademoiselle Laure: ‘On ou' cool gallerie we sit, *mon chère*, and watch the lilies drift; and out in dat worl’—*Le Bon Dieu!*—talk and talk and talk—dem cou'ts! always it was so—I expect, mebbe, it go on fo' eveh, but what has it to do with you and me, *mon chère*, on ou' leetle isle?’”

"But it's ended now." Virgil's voice was low and strong. "Where is she?"

Prosper's old grace inclined him indifferently. He took a pinch of snuff and searched for a cigarette. "Her leetle isle, m'sieu—somewhere she is there. Me—I no go fo' nuttin'. Isle Bonne, m'sieu—it loves her, and every mawnin' it call and call, and every mawnin' Laure she go singin' into her forest."

I heard Clell mutter. He had turned away and was staring at the launch and the figure in it which we could hardly see for the palmettos of the shell beach.

"Messieurs, you shall have the coffee." Papa was moving away to the house door.

"No."

"Ah, yes. One does not come to Isle Bonne, messieurs, and not of our coffee take wan leetle cup. A match to dat charcoal furnace, and we are ready." And in the door he rubbed his slender hands. "To Mademoiselle Laure, m'sieu, you address all dis about cou'ts and lawyehs. Me—I no so much lak dat."

We stood looking from Papa's gallerie. Virgil sighed; his exultance had gone. Somehow the long shades reached from Isle Bonne's plumed oaks to cross his spirit. Then he muttered patiently:

"Laure, she cain't hate me forever."

Clell turned suddenly to him. "If she ever realizes she is beaten, she'll go with the baron—abroad."

Virgil started: "Yes?"

"So they declared. I don't know how—but it—it can't be that way! With that roaring old goat—without money—with nothing but his old sword and his appetite for beer. It would be ridiculous—monstrous! That child of the island woods!"

"She cain't—" the Texan muttered, and stared at Clell. They seemed measuring each other's will and purpose. In the silence I heard Papa shuffling about his bare floor for his coffee things again.

"She cain't," the Texan repeated. "But now—someway, I cain't offer her any money as a compromise—money," he went on again—"that wouldn't do. It's where I made my first mistake—four years ago. I didn't know her then!"

"No. Not if you thought she would be bought off with money."

"Money?" The boss looked at him in wonder that grew to his silent pain. "I ain' doin' this fo' money. She nev' could see." His lean hand motioned to the cypress isle. "But you, Redfield, I thought—" and he was dumb again. Always they thought him the money-grabber, the ditch-digger,

no one could get away from that to sweep the far horizons of his vision which he had no language to express. "Well," he added, "I expaict we ought to go now. Only, money—it was the job I saw—the world's work, fightin' back the jungle on one side, and the sea on the other. Sho', would I gone through what I did the last eight years fo' money?" He looked at me with his old pain, and then his smile. "I expaict from the first I loved her." He looked quietly at the younger man. "I expaict I did—in my ove'alls and jumper, fightin' the main ditch through. And she was lookin' fo' dukes and knights—and I expaict you looked mo' like one than any man she'd eve' seen."

The other man was still. "Well, you had your chance. I've kept still and I've played square. You didn't think it of me, did you?"

"No." He watched Clell again with curious wistfulness. "But you made good. Yes, seh! Damn you—I was just tellin' Mary—out the' in the new boat. She came—she said Doctor Dick sent fo' her. This man's game seemed to bother him some."

Mary! We stared out at the little white cruiser. I had not supposed she *would!*

## CHAPTER XV

### THE GUARDIAN OF THE MONSTER

WE hurried down the hot plank wharf to the new little cabin boat, and I quite upset a languid young town darky who was wiping the hatchway hand-rails. Clell had muttered rebelliously; he was furiously feeling he had been tricked someway or other.

"*You sent for her—and never told me!*" he said.  
"That was not right. And what did you tell her?"

"Nothing. I merely wished Mary to see—well, as a stockholder in this corporation, with all her precious money involved—I thought she had a right to know. Such a mixed affair as we have—business and—er—love, and all that kind of thing. I thought we needed expert advice."

He glared at me—he didn't know how to meet her.

Mary, gray-eyed, calm and sufficient, standing in the doorway, was laughing with old friendliness.

Clell stammered a rather casual greeting as he took her hand; he looked at me again as if he doubted my motives. And then he put on a new stern air; and I saw at once a reaction in her. Quite amazement, almost disbelief, in fact, that her young man had gone so far from her. He had a hardy and rugged initiative, without trace of resentment, now, but mere distant and lofty friendliness. I, too, was astonished; he had the "mental drop" on her as Virgil said afterward.

"Found her in the company's office," the latter explained. "I went in there clean discouraged—it was before I'd heard of the case. And there was Mary talking to young Kenner, askin' how she could get out to our wilderness with the big news she'd just learned. And then she turned on me and said, quite as if she'd exalted me: 'Virgil, we won the case!' I was clean foolish fo' a moment—yes, seh—winnin' that case, and Mary tellin' it to me first!"

"The attorneys had just got their wire," Mary explained, "and I had reached New Orleans that morning. Virgil," she looked at the gaunt Texan, "I never saw him turn pale before."

"Yes, seh, reckon I did. Only nobody knows—well, all this—" He raised his hand solemnly to the silence, the high white heat of sky and marsh and

water. "They told me eight years ago I couldn't do it—and I said I could, and made 'em trust me. I fought it here and in Chicago and New York, and things got worse year by year. Then this lawsuit broke, and I had to fight that, too; and find the money and keep the machines pushin' on and the men at the job. If I told you-all how many times I failed you'd not believe." He smiled patiently. "All right, the peak of the load is shifted. Yeh see the money's comin' now—and the machines and men —started before I left N'Awlyns. Mary, I'm glad you didn't come sooner—it would have been fightin' bad to watch us here—losin'—losin', day by day."

"I know," she answered. "Doctor Dick kept writing me."

Clell and Virgil both looked at me. I had been traitor all around. Clell was still nursing his hurt pride. And I wondered what else? Then, in a moment, Mary, with her quick way of sensing things, spoke what we each were thinking.

"And the girl and her island? What about her?"

We were still. One man of us had a great secret love that was a pathos in his victory; and another had a romantic infatuation that was pity and chivalry combined; and I? Well, I had the memory of the night she saved our lives in the fire-filled canal

—and of the time she hit me with the duck. We were still—it hurt us all.

“She loses everything, I suppose,” Mary went on.

“Yes,” muttered Clell, “that’s the abominable thing about it.”

“I tried to make her see,” Virgil said gently. “I got no call to fight a woman—I tried to explain that years ago. I tried to carry her side of the load, too. But the job couldn’t wait fo’ any one. You see, I had to think of folks up home—widda women, I knew, and people that had bought ou’ stock. Bought company stock on *my word*—when they wouldn’t take the company’s. So I had to win—only Laure couldn’t see. She never will see.”

The dogged hopelessness in him belied his smile.

“Well,” muttered Clell again. “You’ll have to tell her she’s lost. I couldn’t have the face for that!”

Mary looked keenly at him. I noticed now that with all her grooming, that clear look of the north that spoke her strength and poise, she seemed tired a bit, with a wistfulness, as if her coming had not been all that she had dreamed. Her look upon Clell with her old level coolness and common sense became confused, I thought; he had a reserve, a sureness, a man’s rough edge about him now that was new to her, and perhaps startling. And he took her

presence, after his first surprise, with imperturbable complacence; he was no longer the appealing lover of a self-satisfied and successful city woman who could stipulate her own conditions to him. She looked at me suddenly with a smile, and murmured:

“Well, from what I hear, it is a pity!”

“Somehow,” I retorted, “I refuse to be sorry for Laure Drouillot. I don’t know why. Only she seems as capable in her world as you do in yours, Mary. As for her wretched island, confound it! I shall be glad to see it drained and leveed, and cut up and raising corn and truck—every acre of it. So will she some day—she is a cantankerous child, now, even if one does, er—like her.”

“Like her!” cried Mary. “From what I heard—from what Dick wrote—”

“Get out!” I roared. “She—well, there wasn’t much else of interest. This is a wretched hole for summering, and to have a girl with a piratical ancestry poking about, taking a pot shot at you now and then—and once she threw at me, a duck—”

“Doctor Dick,” broke in Mary patiently, “which one of you imagines himself the most in love with her?”

“Tut—tut.” I said. Clell grimaced, and Virgil

was busied with his head-lines. The talk was distasteful to him; and Mary felt it at once.

The two men and the darky were getting the boat away, despite Papa Prosper who was paddling out through the sun with more of his inevitable coffee for the lady. Mary leaned to me as the motor began its humming and we shot around out of the hot cove of the woods.

“Doctor Dick, why did you send for me?”

“Your young man was liable to mess things up. Of course, after all, you love him—”

She gave me a hard look. “Not necessarily. He is perfectly free.”

“Get busy—get busy,” I answered dryly. “You cool, sane, practical modern women don’t know how to love a man. If you did, you wouldn’t talk of him being free. If you have any primal stuff—if you are anything else but the efficient and highly complex and invaluable confidential secretary to the head of the Electric Trust—why, now, be it—use it! Fight with it! Nobody else cares a hang!”

She gave another withering look at me as Clell came aft—big, bronzed, complacent, and with healthy and detached good humor began to trifle with some silver danglet hanging to her hand-bag.

There was no suggestion of an appealing lover about him now—and she saw it.

“Mary looks very fit, doesn’t she, Doctor Dick,” he began, “as ripping as ever—good looks and all.” There was an innocent condescension in his voice that had a remarkable effect on Mary. She got up hastily and went forward to stand at the rail and look off at that fantastic isle of white shells and gray-green jungle with the purple hyacinths floating to the sea. Then she turned back on me the second look of anger I remembered in her since she was a child. I believe she thought we were putting up some sort of game on her.

Clell looked casually after her. “Lordy, what’s the matter with Mary?” Then, after a thought, he turned to stare at Laure’s island. “I wonder if *she* is in any sort of a row—with the baron, or his niggers? Well, the jig is up, poor kid—as far as the land goes. And Williams has his last chance now. Then I’m free of him.”

He still kept his good-humored look upon Mary, who did not return to us until the boat had turned into the main canal at sunset. There, outside the shoals lay a dirty steamboat with a barge in tow, and astern of this a long quarter-boat that seemed alive with men.

"Waitin' fo' the tide!" called Virgil. "Big Jim sho' moved some. We passed him at noon, shovin' that oil-burner through. That's what *winnin'* means! We had fifty thousand dollars on call an hour after that cou't decision. Look at the men—wops this time, and no levee niggers to be scared out by hants and pirate hails. And so you fel-los let 'em voodoo my cook? Sho', I have a passable bad time with cooks!"

He was cheerily filled with the new order. Big Jim hailed him from the oil-barge. In the quarter-boat galley fires were going, and men stuck their heads out to wave at him—some of the old hands who were going back with the boss and knew him. The sight of it all, the men and machines and the sense of power lighting Virgil's eye, made my heart throb—he had waited so long, so stubbornly trusted himself when none other did. Only once, when he looked off at the blue forest isle, I saw the wince of pain. He was looking at me and the battle-light died for a moment, and then lit his face again.

"They'll get in on the flood," he said, "and tomorrow you'll see things begin to shape up at the plant. And as fo' that old mud-hook at the end of the ditch, why she'll be so thick with mechanics by seven o'clock that you cain't see her." He glanced

at a gay little calendar down in the engine-room. "Twenty-eight days more to cinch that option on the Peterson tract—but sho'!—who's worryin' about that now, when we got the Isle Bonne land tied up and branded?" Then his brow contracted after this unwonted exultation. "Only, the hard part—that's comin'"—he jerked his head slowly toward the wooded isle—"and I reckon that's on me, too."

I knew. Mary heard him and she nodded at me. Clell was watching the fleet and army of the new invasion of Isle Bonne. "It's queer," he murmured, "what just a scratch on a piece of paper will do. And two or three moldy old justices sitting about a table in some room, mumbling away together about a matter they never saw or heard or felt in person. They say this, and right away—*Zing!* it loosens up a half million dollars away up in New York, and down here in the swamps two hundred men and boats and barges go smashing into the job. And—somewhere in there"—he, too, made a gesture toward Laure's isle—"they smash her and her dream off the map. What can she understand?"

Mary still was wisely silent. I, too, had nothing to say. Glancing at Mary's calm profile with its clear groomed pallor, which was of health, and yet the health of town and office, and not the sun-

richened content of the outdoors, I had an idea that every instant her alert intuition was reading both of those men quite mercilessly. And their cross-purposes and their problem.

She turned to me at her side presently. "The wonderful thing is how they regard each other—after the way they did in the North! That is splendid, at least—you are a magician in that, Doctor Dick!"

"They hammered it out together. Clell didn't break—and Virgil knew he wouldn't. That's what I call the fine thing. They are man and man now. Only right in Virgil's triumph, Clell's got the edge on him with Laure, and that's what hurts. She'll never let Virgil care for her now; and Clell stands ready to throw up everything to help her. She's too proud and high to listen to anything from Virgil about her island, and as for loving him—"

Mary sat up straight: "Oh, bother! Why shouldn't she?"

I looked at Mary's one-time young man. "You can see for yourself."

I may have been putting it strong. But then I loved these two, and I had wanted them to love each other ever since they sat on my knee. Mary needed a jolt; she always had, for that matter, in

the matter of Clell. As he himself said, she had been super-civilized. He had asked me once long ago if I could imagine Mary having a baby. I could not, any more than I could the Amalgamated Electric.

Mary continued to watch the slant of the rozo cane overhanging the canal. Above it the blue wall of Isle Bonne woods to the northward grew out against the hot opal of the sky. Over that other wall of yellow-green cane came the breeze off the Mexican Gulf. Virgil was watching first one way and then the other. I knew the sad triumphant vision that filled him. Along that outward seaway his miles of levee would arise, behind the ramparts his giant pumps would hurl off the alien waters and the black soil ripen in the sun, until he saw his happy land smiling with homes and gardens. Only for it all he was giving up his love; again he was called on to step aside in the greater thing.

When I went to him he was musing over the steering wheel.

“Yes, seh,” he looked at me patiently, “that little baby buggy with the pink side-winders sittin’ over the’ in that old shack—now I’m goin’ to get it and keep it in out of the damp—but I don’t know fo’ what. Only it’ll be glad to know we won!”

I laughed in some happy despair at him. The sun went down incomparably in far-flung masses of cloud, like tattered worlds falling to the west as the snug little boat followed the last shining light of the canal. She came out upon the sprawled lame monster of a dredge at the end like a neat white nurse hurrying to succor a maimed brawler. Virgil was out on the greasy deck with the line first of all.

"You old hook," he cried buoyantly, "I just want to see," and then he stopped, staring up in the twilight at the great derrick which swung out over the saw-grass with the clam-shell bucket hanging beneath it.

"You?" he went on slowly; "what is it?"

Laure was in the craneman's seat looking down silently. I saw, among the iron levers and chains, the automatic rifle across her lap. The boss' eye was on it also.

"See here," he said, "what is this fo'?"

"I just came," she answered, her small alien hands out to the gear of his beloved beast, "because—well, I knew no one was here."

"You stole our boat last night," cried Clell. "Why that?"

"I didn't want you to go in," she said faintly.

"There was much—much—they were very angry—the men we had—"

"And you came here," put in Virgil grimly, "with your little gun to watch to-night, fo' fear they'd turn a trick on me?"

"I—" she seemed to shrink from his directness, "didn't know. There was a fight, you see, but I didn't want—I wanted it *fair*, you know—after what you said before about me."

The Texan was gazing at the muzzle of the little gun in wonder.

"And your machine," she went on, "I wasn't going to hurt it, m'sieu. Only to hinder you—delay you—keep you from my little isle. But the baron, he waved his sword and said always: 'Lawyers and mud-diggers—never, mademoiselle, consider them—no, never—*jamais—jamais!*'"

"I think," said Virgil dryly, "you had better get down."

"I can't," she murmured. "When I heard your boat coming, I tried to slip down and to my pirogue—and something jerked on the little lever when I touched it, and just then the chain went across my foot."

She was not allowed to finish. Those two men were forward and swinging up the iron ladder to

the craneman's roost. Virgil was the quicker. His voice trembled when he touched her.

"Be still, there," he ordered. "The ratchet wheel slipped. The cogs on that reverse—well, be still." He worked silently about the girl's feet. I could see her staring down in the gloom.

"It hurts," she said presently, "it's tightening on my ankle."

Clell had slipped down and was in the engine-room to get a wrench at Virgil's command. He whispered to me in the murk of the shed.

"You know the fix she's in? There's a two-ton bucket hanging by the chain, and that over a broken tooth on the cog—the thing *her* dynamite smashed. If it drops it'll drag her down—smash her on the gear like a fly."

He was gone with that, tiptoeing to the derrick ladder, reaching up. Softly the two men worked without a word, hardly breathing. If she knew death touched her, hung on the crumbling point of a cog-tooth, she did not quiver. She leaned over, her dark eyes watching Virgil who seemed trying to insert a steel bar in the links of a chain and do it all as delicately as one would tamper with an infernal machine. Once the smaller chain slipped, the gear shuddered; and the Texan stopped rigidly.

"Be still," he breathed, but no one was moving. Then I heard him mutter: "You little thing—what did you come here for?"

"I wanted to be sure. There was no one here, you see."

And I grasped that she had stolen out of the isle to look after his black monster, to see, for some reason, that no harm came to it from the baron's renegades.

She finished her slow murmur to him. "I thought it wouldn't be fair, if they did—in spite of everything, you see!"

Then he also understood. He even paused in that grim slow work that meant her life or death. "You see," he went on, "I'd thrust my right arm in this cog—only it wouldn't stop anything fo' a second."

And she nodded. "I've been watching it for a long time. The little wheel, there, the steel kept crumbling on that cog—I could just see it while the big thing swung and swung. Then it stopped."

We saw him wipe her blood from the back of his hand across his brow; and she stared down at it. It was hurting horribly, the slow twist of even that delayed weight across her foot. And then Virgil had worked his stout bar into the chain link, the end

of it through a step of the ladder; and with the other end across his shoulder was rising from the steps below—rising and bending his back under the weight, straining, with great gasps for breath until the iron rungs were buckling under him.

Clell had come below him. But there was no room for two. Again it was a man's size job—for one. We waited in that dusk, the Texan rising powerfully under his short lever, and the girl staring down at him, her hands down to his shoulders by her skirt. In that stillness we heard presently a mere clank. Then as his straining breath came shorter, a soft jar—and the chain had slipped back safely upon the broken tooth. And he stood up looking at her, his wide gray hat off, the sweat upon the pallor of his brow.

"You little thing," he muttered, "you neve' knew, did you?"

"Yes," she answered simply, "all the time. When your boat touched the dredge I wondered if it would jar the chain off. I didn't want to call. I—I couldn't call *you*—I just wondered."

"Wondered? You would have died here to-night —when that cog crumbled under the bucket's weight. Do you know?"

She had hopped a step away as he helped her down. Then, quite free of him, she put a hand to the engine-room door frame and laughed.

"I know. And I wondered. What you-all would say. The Yankees, they could tell: 'No mo' she fight us fo' the little isle. The big machine has killed her.' "

The boss turned from the place. Her blood was on his hands, and he wiped it across the derrick beam. Mary had come to her.

"You're hurt, my dear—where?"

The mistress of the isle hopped on like a crippled bird. "Not much—my foot is cut, maybe. In the cypress, once, a tree blew down across my pirogue, and I slashed my way out with my knife. But this—yes, it hurts—and I am much obliged."

And looking at us and then the Texan in some confusion, she repeated. "I'm very much obliged. I wondered what it was like up there to sit and swing the crane and watch the black jaws grind the life out of the little flowers and grasses. So, I only touched it—so—and it fell and caught me."

The boss was looking quietly at her; she would let none touch her bruised foot—a bit of her old blithe defiance had returned.

"To-morrow," Virgil muttered, "you come, and

you'll see it work. Outside—" he beckoned down the channel. "Outside, the's a hundred men and two mo' machines—the canal is goin' clean to the sea. You—you cain't stop us now, fo' you see—we won!"

There was no need to say what he meant. I could see her white face, framed by the dark hair all disarrayed, set mute and grave. Then quietly she spoke, but as if considering the iron repression in his voice and not his words.

"You understand, don't you?"

"Oh, yes. You mean we lost our island?"

"We won," he went on steadily. "I told you long ago!"

She sat quietly back upon the girder. I had thought some great grief, an outcry would be hers; or a passionate rebellion and defiance to him, the courts, the law and officers. She had held them in contempt so long, trusted so implicitly.

"I don't believe we lost our island. The baron, always he say we can not lose our island. M'sieu, you are much mistaken."

Virgil turned in grim despair to us. "You see that, Doctor Dick?"

"Mademoiselle, it's very true," I began. "The Supreme Court—"

"Oh, damn the court!" Clell broke in hotly. "Can't you see she's hurt, and all shaken up without this? It was no time to tell her." He had gone to Laure, but she held him off with a gesture that showed all of us she wished to see Virgil's face clearly.

"M'sieu, you have nev' been a very bad man befo'." She dropped back gently into her island patois. "Papa Prosper, at the first he like yo'—always—always. He say: 'Dis gentleman, Laure, neve' he unkind lak a cou't.' And I, m'sieu," she stopped, while we waited for her to go on. "Ah, well, my little island! Why should it shine in the sun so? and be so green, and with the shells so white and with the lilies drifting, if they going to cut it up? *Le Bon Dieu*—neve' fo' that He make things beautiful."

"I reckon we can make it more beautiful," the Texan said with a curious humbleness, "if you'd only believe so."

She listened with rare attentiveness. Again Mary wanted to bandage that limping foot of hers with the hem of her skirt, and again Laure refused; and would not even take Clell's arm to her little green canoe that swung alongside.

"I don't believe," she murmured. "The baron

he say—oh, this very day, he say: ‘La Marquise, neve’ you lose you’ little island.’ ”

“You’ve lost,” Virgil said gently. “And it’s as hard fo’ me as when you began the fight. Only you’d neve’ let me say so. Only you couldn’t see!”

She looked at him in some confused respect that I could not fathom. And as she moved away she repeated in her quaint sincerity:

“To you, m’sieu, I am very much obliged. Fo’ saving my life. That was very fine. But me—I’m going now. Away.”

“Away?”

“To Messieur le Baron. Always I trust him most. Neve’ he care for money. Always, he say, does Messieur le Baron. ‘Fo’ fair ladies I fight with my long sword, mademoiselle—but neve’ fo’ money as Yankees do.’ Like a knight—only he so fat.”

“He would fight for his beer,” I murmured, “as any proper knight would do.” But she did not hear me, and went down into her little green pirogue, and sent it off in the star-dusted canal between the shadowy cane masses. We were left staring after her in some helplessness; and when her clear voice came again out of the dusk we had no answer.

“Fo’ my life, m’sieu—I very much obliged.”

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE BIG HIDE-UP

I WAS awakened the next morning in the grimy little bunk-house on Williams' dredge by the grind of some heavier body against her timbers, and then the scuffle of feet, cries and orders. Clell, who had a bed across from me was already out from his mosquito bar, and when I went to the work-deck I discovered that the steamboat was alongside with the oil-barge, and that men were already swarming off with a staging to unload the stuff for the repair of Williams' machine. The Texan himself stood watching the operations, and Big Jim, acting mate, was cursing the crew in right true levee style.

Virgil raised his hand: "Jim, you fo'get the's a laidy in our cabin boat—and she's just twenty yards fo'ward. A man could sho' hear you cuss a mile away. And a laidy like Mary—I expaict two miles."

Big Jim grinned and at once evolved a sulphuric pantomime for his wops. The skilled mechanics were already looking over the wreck of the hoisting

gear. "I reckon it's no place fo' laidies," went on the boss. "Last night I had to pry one out of that reverse chain." Then he saw me. "And I wondah how that little foot is this mawnin'?"

He had the light of new battle in his tired eyes. "Yes, seh! It's big. Sorry to rout yo' out so early, Docteh Dick—but the man's size job is under way again. We'll blow and worm a way to salt wateh now, and no little old sorry ghosts can worry this bunch."

But one little ghost on the green isle surely worried him. His gray eyes leveled to the woods across the sun-flecked marsh. And his patient regret came into the voice: "All right—I know what you' thinkin'. I'll fix that up, too, someway."

And then after a pause: "I reckon I muddled it up fo' fair, tellin' her that-a-way. Only I have no other way." Then he was back seriously directing the placement of his new gear.

Clell was forward checking off the stuff as it came over the staging. It was a white hot morning, the gulf breeze stilled; and the black gnats danced through the engine-room and stung the sweating fellows. I was turning aft to see what the new cook had done about breakfast, as the boss' outfit seemed to consider me no further, when I saw Mary

signaling to me from the awninged shade of Virgil's smart little cabin cruiser. "Went and stuck two thousand dollars into that tub soon as I heard we'd won," he had told me. "I couldn't have Mary com-in' down to our swamp in that old *Zelie*."

Mary Mason looked very comfortable in her blue-trimmed sailor blouse. The breakfast things were laid on a neat white table, and she had drawn some purple hyacinth spikes from the canal to set it off. Down in the galley a yellow boy was busied with coffee and bacon. It was the first thing like a really civilized meal I had seen in five months.

"It's like Virgil, isn't it?" she said. "The minute I met him he began to see to me—and yet he hasn't spent a moment from his work, it seems. It's queer the way the men all jump about for him—he gets things going, somehow."

"Most things," I murmured, and sampled her pineapple.

She smiled in a rather wan fashion. I don't believe she had slept well; perhaps one wouldn't translated overnight from the Amalgamated Electric to the savage morasses of John-the-Fool. "Did you ever hear such frightful noises?" she went on. "Mosquitoes on the screens and the boom of those

frogs and an alligator or so, and the awful owls. I thought the wilderness was quiet."

"Ah, the wilderness! Somehow, we've come to love it all."

"Yes," she said absently, and looked across the canal to where the clatter of hammers and the banging of metal, and the drift of soot down on our white spread told of the new attack on the man's size job. "Love it?" She was curiously intent on the bronzed fellow who supervised the job forward. "Clell is so—changed!"

"Wasn't that what was wanted? He's proved himself a man. Not a whimper, not a false note. Of course you couldn't expect him to love Virgil."

"But that wasn't what I meant. I thought he—"

"You thought he would still be tagging at your skirts." I went on attacking the eggs and bacon. "Well, you see a new man, don't you? He's got some of Virgil's stuff, despite himself. The wilderness—and Laure."

"The wilderness, dear Doctor Dick," she went on quite humbly, "was up there—with me. I thought I could forget more—easily." She added with some rising indignation. "You and Clell are both abominable! Virgil, of course, is his own dear, grim self

—a pure sentimentalist, pathetically in love, at last, with this island girl.”

“And she with your young man who is chivalrously attracted,” I said with brutal expediency.

“Virgil moons and moons—when he ought to steal her!”

“Mary,” I retorted, “you are an utter barbarian! Imagine any one stealing *you*!”

“Ah, if one could! It must be splendid. It wouldn’t be business—but what fun!”

“See here, this will never do. This absurd island is bother enough as it is. The baron has medievalized everything and every one except Virgil. And Papa Prosper. He waves his rooster cap, and at once Laure imagines she will marry a duke, and Clell imagines he loves her, and the swamp niggers believe in a buried treasure ship, and Mangy sees a ghost-head sticking out of the grass. And I—the practical person—ah, me! One time I kissed her!”

“What!”

“It was part of her education.”

“Indeed?” Mary mused.

“And Clell is crazy about her. It’s his chivalrous idea about her wrongs. And she’s extraordinarily good-looking.”

“Yes?” continued Mary.



It was like a bit of pageant



"I saw her once do a dance in a rare old gown she had before it was dynamited one night with me in the canal. It was an evening when the baron had roared quite valiantly over his third bottle, after Allesjandro had played all the *Rigoletto* music, and had demanded of Laure that she show the bald-headed doctor what a great lady she could be. So she did some sort of a Creole dance, and I swear it was like a big pageant—the smoky old rafters of his shack, hung with red peppers and dried things, the old fellow in his red robe and with his pipe and sword and feather."

"Doctor Dick," said Mary absently, "you'd better go north."

I was trying to shake Mary up out of her hyper-civilized complacence about love and all that sort of thing. It was all right for me, but in Mary? I went on with praise of Laure Drouillot; but Mary seemed disinterested. Clell and Virgil came on the *Seabird* for lunch despite their grim intent on the dredge boat and its mechanics.

And while we were at it, a grotesque figure pushed its way out of the saw-grass by the boat's rail.

"Done come!" it quavered, and we saw it was Mangy! He splashed out of that noon heat gasp-

ing, rolling his eyes. "Dey done use me mean, Docteh! Yes, seh. Ah come back fo' mah job. Dem old pirate hails—dey ain't nuffin but ha'd work!"

We got that disillusioned and emaciated cook on board. He was a sight after that half-day fighting his way a mile through the morasses of John-the-Fool to the canal. Williams' immaculate yellow boy from N'Awlyins eyed the mud that dripped from him on the clean white deck with vast disfavor. Mangy hastened to grasp my hand and distributed more upon it—and me.

Then his eyes rolled mysteriously: "Dey done got it!"

"Got what?" Clell said sharply.

"Dat big hide-up. Eve' since Crump, dat bad niggeh, gave me er sign to quit you, dey had me diggin'. Dey made me wu'k all night—dey lammed me wid pistols, and dis mawnin' I got out—but I seen 'em—yes, seh!"

"What did you leave us for?"

"Ah got mah sign—dat's it. Crump and Hogjaw dey put dat mark on yo' drudge. Dat ol' pirate voodoo, it chase all Marse Virgil's niggehs when they see it. Anyhow, dey'd killed me sho', if Ah hadn't done come in. Dey showed me de haid—Ol'

Armand Drouillot's haid. Sho' did. So I had to come in to dem, and Crump he beat me up."

We looked at that lamentable cook in stupefied amazement. He looked back in the dim water-aisles of John-the-Fool in terror that was actually humorous. And our northern Mary regarded him standing there, holding his rag of a hat, and with not so much shirt on him as would clean out my pipe bowl, with the look of one who has discovered something new in comic opera.

"Did you suppose such people existed?" she murmured.

Virgil sat down on the cushions, and motioned to the yellow boy. "Get him something to eat—and rummage a shirt if you can." Then he turned to Mangy: "Now tell us something we can understand—start at the beginnin'."

Mangy rubbed his black paws and licked his chops. Then he rubbed the welts on his woolly skull where the renegades had mauled him. "Dey used to skun outen de swamp and up to mah window on dat drudge, an' leave de signs. Sometimes Ah find er little bone on mah bed, er a piece o' bresh on de kitchen flo'. Sometime er piece o' paper tacked on de wall. Dey put de sign on it."

"What sign?"

Mangy swallowed helplessly. "Oh, sho'—white folks neve' unnerstand! Me—Ah'm er swamp niggeh, an' Ah unnerstand. Ah neve' say nuffin to yo', Marse Virgil. Den de las' night dey show me de haid, and Ah surrendeh. Ah come in and ast 'em whaffor? What yo' want wid me? And dey mek me dig in dat ol' slave ship—yes, seh! And dey got it!"

"Got what?" said Clell impatiently.

"De hide-up. What dat ol' baron he been hangin' eround fo'—an' a scoutin' an' a plunderin' in de swamp fo' fo' years."

"The baron! He got it—and what *was* it?"

"Ah dunno. Dey keep me and Hogjaw at de pump all night, an' dey blow de shells out o' dat ol' slave ship. And de baron sit dere on his luggah and watch wid a gun. And Allesjandro he watch wid a gun. Crump and Doc Fortune, dey dig and hist, and dig and hist in dat old ship cabin, and dey get de hide-up on dat luggah dis mawnin'. Dat girl she sit watchin', all a-time watchin'. Dey knew yo' men was close and dey ready to shoot all right if anybody come plunderin' 'round."

"Can you beat it?" murmured Clell. "And Laure in with them?"

"But what on earth did they get?" Mary said interestedly.

"Dat ol' baron, he know! He been one of dem—ol' Armand's men—dat used to smuggle niggehs in fo' de wah. He done come back 'ca'se he know!"

All the baron's former moonings about Isle Bonnie's mystic treasure came back to me; the folly with which he had filled Laure's mind. I, too, was muttering: "What on earth *did* they get?"

"Gold?" put in Clell.

Mangy rolled his gaunt eyes. "Ah dunno. Didn't let me see."

"Go on," continued Virgil patiently. "Then what?"

"Dey hist a big trunk on dat Manilaman's luggah. Den dey show me de haid. Sho'—it was a haid made outen an old stump all painted up with eyes like saucers starin' so. Dey used to snuck up and show dat to de niggehs and dey scar' 'em outen de swamp."

"But the hide-up, Mangy—go on about it."

Mangy wiped his lank jaw. He had been beaten with the butt of a gun and was half starved besides.

"Go on," commanded Virgil. "When you're through you can go in the galley and eat. And work

to-morrow. I ought to fire you, but I won't. This is mighty inter-estin'."

"Well, Marse Virgil, dey done gwine away wid dat hide-up."

"Away?"

"Dey had a fight afteh dey blowed up dat old hulk and got dat box on boa'd. Done had a big fight—dem niggers and de Manilaman. I skun out in de swamp so dey couldn't fight me, and when I saw las' dey was polin' de luggah out Bayou L'Ourse fo' de lake."

Virgil's chair came down interestedly. "Yes—who was on board?"

"Dat baron and Prosper's girl and Allesjandro, all I see."

The boss straightened up and looked across at his swarm of busy mechanics on the dredge boat. Afar up the canal came the whistle of the tow steamer moving the stuff in for the new invasion of the Isle Bonne swamps. But the eyes were fixed northward to the forest wall.

"Goin'?" he muttered. "The baron—and her?"

Then with a motion he sent the forlorn cook to the galley. He turned to Mary seriously. "If yo' was as plumb crazy about any one as I am would you chase after 'em, and commit crimes fo' 'em?"

"I would," announced Mary, "as sure as can be!"

"Yes?"

"High crimes and misdemeanors!"

"That don't sound like you, Mary, and I knew you since you was knee-high to a grasshopper back in the short-grass country."

She pulled her wide Panama more over her eyes and turned to him with decision. "Oh, I know! Doctor Dick doesn't think it in me either. But I tell you now, Virgil, if you love that girl you must stop her."

"She sho' hates me enough now."

"She loves you."

Just then the dredge engines which had been idle all these hot and heartbreaking months started up with a fearful clatter of chains and drums, for Big Jim's try-out. One could not hear a thing. But Virgil was staring at Mary.

"What's that!"

"I say she loves you."

The Texan suddenly made a motion to the engineer across the narrow channel from our deck. Then he called:

"Seh! Stop that machine!"

The long crane ceased its swing, and the big clam-shell closed its jaws on the empty air above the saw-

grass. The boss turned to Mary once more, and his own jaws set more grimly.

"See here, I'm stoppin' the job just at the jump-off I've waited six years fo'. Stoppin' it just to hear you, Mary. Say that again!"

"She loves you."

Clell was listening distantly from the stern seat cushions. Virgil had taken Mary's arm; I think he was closing on it rather tightly.

"If I thought so, I'd tear this swamp wide open. Neve' saw a chance—neve' saw a sign of it."

"Oh, you foolish man—there are a dozen! I tell you what you must do now—you must steal her—to-day—this very night, and make her tell it."

Across from us the grimy-faced men were standing about expectantly.

"What's the matter, there—man?" called Big Jim impatiently. The boss did not see or hear him, apparently.

"Come on, now," went on Mary's cool voice. "Crimes and misdemeanors. I—I'm with you, Virgil."

"Mary!" I exclaimed.

"Doctor Dick," she answered firmly, "you've known me twenty-seven years, and Clell for ten, and neither of you ever suspected me of having any red

blood. *Her* piratical ancestors? Why, who knows? —I, too, may have been bred from the buccaneers?"

My young man under the stern awnings, was listening with new vast attention. She gave him as barbaric a glance as any five-thousand-a-year-employee of a corporation can—and he smoked away with composure. Mary's new young man—ah, me! Somehow I had a sudden idea that Mary had fallen madly in love with this new, bronzed, hard-handed and swaggering young man of the outdoors. Now,—of course, it was plain why she wanted Laure Drouillot kidnaped and safely out of the way!

"Extraordinary!" I gasped to myself. "Just like Mary—committing her crimes in a wholly cool, efficient and common-sense manner!" Then I sighed: "Ah, the times, ah, the manners! Where are our pirates of yesterday?"

But she was turning to Virgil with intentness.

"Of course she'll flare up, and all that. But Virgil, come on, now—must I expound it to you? *Can't* you see she loves you?"

"Hold on," he muttered, "somethin's goin' to blow up on this mud-hook in a minute, if the pressure isn't relieved! Yes, seh, tell me!"

"She's afraid of herself when she's with you. You had her beaten long ago—and never knew it.

She risks her life for your gamble here—but she won't give in, never—never! And still she knows you care for her—that's the woman in it. Oh, I know—we can't say the word when they turn from us. It's too deep in us."

"Mary—"

"And now she's going—going away, defeated—with that silly old chap. And maybe they've got a treasure—who knows?—and it's yours."

"Treasueh nothing. I knew a man in Terrebonne who dug fo' three years and he got somethin', too. Box of rusty ship-chain and chills and feveh. Big Jim's got fou' treasueh maps he's collected from different cajuns. I seen mo' hide-ups on this south coast than you can count. You cain't inter-est me in treasueh—except what I get out of this land with a tractor plow—when the ditches are in."

"Well," Mary said calmly, "there is Laure—isn't she enough?"

He jumped up with something like a whoop. His arm shot out with the gesture that the boss used to signal the engineman above the roar of the drums. Big Jim turned to his levers—and the chains and cables groaned on their new gear—the man's job was on once more.

"By five o'clock," shouted Big Jim, "she'll be cut-

tin' righto! I promised that, didn't I, Williams? Watch my smoke!"

Williams did not hear. He and Mary were talking pointedly, and when Mary went back over the gangway to the white cabin boat, the boss followed her in more of a daze than I had ever seen him.

Then presently he came leaping across the plank and was back to his bunk-house behind the dredge-boat, and calling to the bull cook as he went.

"Get that hot water, boy! Yes, seh—and them sto' clothes! Lay 'em out in the' faster than any yelleh boy eve' moved in this swamp!"

"What's the matter?" I inquired innocently.

He gave me a hard look as he dodged in. "Doc-teh Dick, you're a no-account son-of-a-gun! You been hangin' around here since April, and it took Mary to start somethin'. Mary—you might have known it would take Mary!"

I left him in his hot little room, with the boy hopping for things this way and that, and went to the *Seabird*. Mary sat quite calmly on the stern seat cushions.

"We ought to put you quite out of this," she said with sudden severity.

"Out of what? And what have I done?"

"Nothing. That's your infamy. Nothing but

drooled away over your pipe and let things run on. Virgil—poor chap, you might have made him see long ago!"

"Did you expect *me* to assist at any such wild expedition as getting a chap married—or that sort of thing? Not remotely. I would as soon see a man into a loblolly."

"And what's that?"

"It's a hole with no bottom. Clell is in one now. And Virgil—you're pushing him into another one —only worse."

"You have done wretchedly, Doctor Dick. I'm not certain I love you any more. You've been a traitor even to the land company. And Virgil's affair—"

"And yours, my dear—"

She refused to advert to any possible affair of hers. I went down from that frigid area of the stern deck and filled my pipe out of the jar on Virgil's cabin table. Then I read a current review languidly—it was the first I had seen in months, and the affairs of the world appeared incomprehensible —mere piffle from some other planet.

I tried to be indifferent to this piffle of Mary's and Virgil's. Even when Virgil and his close shave came on board followed by the yelleh boy and two

others of the crew, I refused interest to them. One was a white man, a small, wiry, narrow-eyed chap, and the other a big black fellow; and I guessed the first to be one of Williams' gun-toters from the river, and the last to be a deep swamp nigger who knew Isle Bonne's intricate waterways, and was emancipated from ghost hails and such.

"Sho, boss," I heard him say, when we had turned and were going back along the channel. "Ah can go in deh. And dat Manilaman he'll have to wait fo' a tide to get his luggah into de lake. An' a full moon tide he'll get afteh midnight—and no sooneh. If he hasn't poled out now."

Mary and Virgil talked earnestly on the stern seats. When I sauntered aft to get the breeze and less smell of the motor below, they ceased, and the conversation dribbled to sunsets and mosquitoes. It was nine miles to the open lakes and for seven of them they did not notice me. The yelleh boy got more consideration. We passed the string of work-boats at the pumping-plant site where already the men were cleaning out the abandoned concrete foundations of the dam to build the higher frames, and young Ryan, the new structural engineer in charge, hailed the boss with a friendly message to the stenographer in the city offices of the land company.

Virgil shook his head. "Not goin' out front this trip. Goin' in—deep!" He laughed, and the motor throbbed on out into a sea of gold where the level sunrays lay upon the tidal lakes. Eastward and south the cloud-splendor of the hurricane months lay over the gulf; the heat was a thing that crept to your bones in that breezeless air.

"He'll get no wind till mornin'," muttered Virgil. "Treasureh! A-runnin' off with ou' treasureh. Why, the old coyote!"

"Which?" I ventured, and from the silence I felt out of it.

"If there had been any decent place to put you, we would not have brought you along," returned Mary, at length. "You're not a bit of use."

Still one had one's pipe. I did not need their confidences.

We turned the long marsh point that marked the easternmost reach of Isle Bonne's salt grass. The wooded *cheniere* lay six miles to westward in that molten glow of sun and lake. The big black, who knew the shoals and sand spits, ran in shoreward at half speed, and then we chugged along slowly, muffled down, coming up under the first of the woods where the shell reefs arose. Isle Bonne's single house still lay two miles about the point of

cypress. A glorious opal twilight was on us now; with a moon rimming the storm-clouds eastward.

The anchor chain went down and the *Seabird* swung in the slow tide. They would not take a chance on running farther and being discovered. So we dined under the awnings, the weazened little deputy with us, and the black man in the galley with the boy.

"There's a good many things you can get the baron on, Mr. Williams," said the gun-toting deputy. "Smugglin', piracy, resistin' an officer, grand larceny and—"

"The old dog hasn't done any of 'em yet."

"He will before we get through with him," answered Daggetts pleasantly. "We'll plant enough on him to stick."

"I don't want him. I wouldn't load up with *him* fo' a farm. All I want is—" he broke off, eying Mr. Daggetts furtively—he was not the fellow to take the whole world into his confidence. He looked at me quizzically, and then at Clell who had idled aft for the hour obviously occupied with his thoughts. Virgil went on in a lower tone to Mary: "No manneh of use to tell this fel-lo, Daggetts, that we're kidnapin' a lady. Sho', he thinks he's out to gun those bad niggers. Hogjaw's a gin-and-laudanum

nigger and got a levee record, and Daggetts is wishful fo' to meet him."

He turned to take the wheel from his black helmsman. But he beckoned Mary again to his side. "You' goin' to get me in bad, Mary—she'll sho' hate the air I breathe after this."

"It's your only gamble," she retorted. "Come, be a *sport*."

I went back to the stern awnings wondering what had got into Mary, the complacent "Sport!" Clell was finishing his cigar.

"What do you think of it," I asked, "as a show-down?"

"He loses. Granting that he finds her. You see, he's got the island, and she can't forgive that. He can't come to her now—she'll not listen. She's too mighty proud, and if he steals her according to Mary's idiotic idea, she'll hate him more than before."

"Tut-tut!" I answered. "That is what you wish—and the wish is father to the thought. And you, my boy—how about yourself?"

"I—" he said placidly, "give him his chance—I told him I'd play right, you know. But there's Mary—I don't understand what's got into *her*."

I left him with a suspicion that after all he was

troubled by that. Stupid, that he could not see! I concluded they were both getting about what they deserved out of their first egregious quarrel. Mary's young man was seriously independent, that was plain—and she saw it. It was well enough for her; she ought to understand that with men, love is a thing which, if they do not meet on one corner, they will on the next.

Octave, the black steersman, held far in the lake when we turned out of the canal. Off the eastern-most point of Isle Bonne's marshy shore the shoals ran far, and it was quite sundown when we were able to run northward. Octave held his palm to the southward. "Air's stirrin', Misteh Williams. If they get a breeze to-night, look out. That luggeh'll outsail and motor-boat you got."

"It's the hurricane month and afternoon squalls. They'll get no wind until to-morrow after nine o'clock."

But the south coast black shook his head: "Wind's movin' somewhe'."

Daggetts, from the stump of a mast forward on the cabin, kept a lookout. It was almost dusk when he called Williams from the wheel.

"She's out—lyin' becalmed in the flood-tide, and it's movin' him northerly. We better run behind

the point and lay till it's dark if you want to surprise 'em."

We all saw now, against the last glow, the outline of Allesjandro's great red sail. It was two miles westward. The doughty baron and his man had got well cleared of the forest channel by means of pole and oars, it seemed. And now the air was stirring faintly from the southeast. The black splendor of the daily squall clouds still lay there over the gulf.

"We better lie low until late," Daggetts counseled. "If he picks up a breeze, and knows we're after him, he can run for the west'ard passes and into the Gulf of Mexico. That little Manilaman knows every rod of shore and shoal, and he's got a weather boat, too."

"How about the reef off the cypress point this side of Prosper's?" Virgil asked his man.

"We c'n lay under it for the flood tide and they won't see us. We draw three feet fo', boss—we betteh lay up than take a chance o' goin' aground and have that Manilaman laugh."

The boss was reluctant. Not that he had any idea what he was to do. In this criminal proceeding I saw now that he was completely at the command of Mary, the super-civilized.

"The' was a fight," he murmured. "That's what

sticks me—that yarn of Mangy's. And the little girl—the last he saw—sittin' on her great-grand-dad's buccaneer boat with her gun. And lookin' pale-like and sad, Mangy said."

"Did she? Well, she was escaping her troubles—and you."

"Sho'! Mary, sometimes I believe you! All right—we'll lay up till the tide's filled. Then we'll come down on 'em, by Mighty—throw a rope about the mast of that luggeh, throw the Manilaman ove'-boa'd—and then yo' listen to me—Mary! I'll give her some talk—and the whole hell-a-mile world can stand the' and hear it!"

We anchored in that warm dark under the cypress point and at last the shape of the lugger grew indistinct, faded into the star-strewn horizon, while to the south the wink of the gulf storm showed now and then, Isle Bonne's white shell shore.

Clell and I sat morosely apart over our tobacco. The conspirators seenied to have small use for us.

"Doctor Dick," muttered my companion after a while, "who'd have thought anything of the sort in Mary? I didn't suppose she had the stuff! Not that I care now—particularly."

Another Barataria mosquito had me on the nose; I refused to discuss affairs of the heart with him or any one.

## CHAPTER XVII

### BREED OF THE BUCCANEERS

SOME time after midnight, Octave, the big black, who had been sent in the dingey to the cypress point that he might keep watch on the lugger when the light failed us, returned cautiously.

“Dat Manilaman, he went ashore—and Ah reckon de old man wif him. And dey reefed deh sail down, and none o’ dem is on watch.”

“And the tide?” muttered Virgil, who had sat staring into the darkness most of the long hours.

“Fou’ feet ove’ dat reef—we can skun it. Only we betteh pole an’ drift, and pole an’ drift twel we close down on dem. Dat Crump will shoot quick.”

Mr. Daggetts yawned from his cushions. Conversation had long since failed us. Virgil had vainly tried to have Mary retire to her little forward cabin; she was calmly interested in the next move. “You see it was my idea, after all,” she answered me, when I had doubted the expediency of having her along. And Clell, on whom a watchful moodiness had fallen, since he had guessed the plot of the ex-

pedition, evinced no interest in Miss Mason's doings one way or the other.

A few whispered words, and the *Seabird* was shoved over the long sand reef that ran from the cypress point two miles into the lake. The breeze still held gently from the southeast and would bear us with the flood tide, directly down upon Allesjanddro's craft lying all unsuspectingly in the channel a half-mile off Prosper's cove.

"They're going to leave, all right," said Virgil, "or they'd never laid off shore so far with the squalls blowin' around. It's mighty poor anchorage out there. But they don't want to be caught in close on an ebb-tide if they had to get out in a hurry."

He was pole-walking the little cruiser along one side, and Octave on the other. She slid easily along, only grating her keel twice on the bars. The pole-runners moved in silence, and the cloud-wrapt heavens favored us. The moon was rising, but so far it threw nothing save a curious web of light that was more concealing to us than real darkness. The dim shore points became mysterious blurs, and through this enveloping distortion we floated in a profound stillness. Virgil had cautioned us not to talk, and the four of us stared into that illusion of moonlight,

with no sound coming to us save the drip of water from the pole-runners and the soft shuffle of their feet along the gunwales.

It seemed an hour of this acute waiting before I heard the black man whisper in the silence. He had been keeping the little cruiser broadside on in the sweep of the tide over the shallows, but now he held her stern in with the drag-hook so that she came head-on with the run of water. And there, straight ahead, I saw the lugger riding, her red sail at a careless half-reef, without lights, apparently untenanted.

"By Mighty," Virgil muttered, "another moment and we'd rode across her chains!" He was laughing now with an exultation of adventure new to him. Men he had crossed and fought, and tide and flood and storm and fortune, but for love of a woman, never. He had whispered as much to me on this night, with a return of his old shy confidence, and a knowing shrug toward Mary. "If she isn't right, why I'm makin' a big horse-play of it all, Docteh Dick!"

Octave and the boss conferred a moment forward; then I saw the black man slip over the side, stealthily down in the water, and swim off with a trailing line. We drifted silently past the lugger,

and then I heard a soft grating and knew the swimmer had fastened a grapple low on her anchor chain. Daggetts, the little deputy, watched interestedly, sitting cross-legged on the cabin top with his short shotgun across his knees. He mumbled his disappointment to me. "Might as well have left me in camp. Ain't a nigger on her—no one else that I can see."

Virgil was sheering the launch off so that she did not grate along the *Good Child's* gunwale. Then he was across and tiptoeing gently to the open hatch in the midship section. The cabin of the lugger was an extremely low affair, the rounding roof hardly rising from the deck. The boss was stooping to peer within. Then he was listening.

He came back to us and whispered.

"It's strange. She's there, but no one else. The bar is drawn across the bunk—and her scarf—that little lace thing she used to wear, remembeh? It's lying on the edge of the bunk—yes, seh—and she's under the bar—asleep. I—I," he murmured softly, "can hear her breathe."

He was laughing gently, but aglow with excitement.

"They, the rest of 'em, must be ashoo' getting ready fo' the start. They got a lot of new plunder

down in the cabin, but I cain't see exactly. Now, you fel-los start that engine—half-speed. I'll stay on this boat. I—I—want to see her awaken."

And he went back to peer within at her vague form in the darkness. She would be face to face with him, now—in his power, as he wished, and she would have to listen to his victoriousness, whatever the issue.

When the launch slid away and the line tightened we could still see him staring within, and he seemed to be laughing but awed by his new adventure. In all his fighting life never had he turned aside for an affair of women; he was swept to a great exultance by its chances.

The *Seabird* drew on at half-speed, the throb of her motor deepening but muffled as the tug of the heavier craft made her labor. Then the *Good Child* came on astern, and we lost Virgil and his lone watch of his revered shrine.

Once above the hum of the engine I thought I heard a faint shout from Isle Bonne's dim shore; then we hurried on. The deputy got up and stretched his legs.

"Well, what did Williams bring *me* for? I come for bad niggers, and he gives me a boat ride—and a

few mosquitoes—and it's a fine night for stars." He went forward to the steersman with his complaints.

Clell came to sit musingly with us, looking astern now and then at the stolen lugger and its freight.

"All the same, when she awakens, I wouldn't care about facing her, and be Williams."

"I think," said Mary decisively, "when we get far enough from Isle Bonne so the baron can not possibly interfere, we shall cut the tow line and leave them to their own affairs—although it would be worth years of life to hear Virgil tell her he loves her. But it would be a shame. I really think we shall cut the line. He's a good sailor, and she?—well, she can't escape him, you see."

"Yes," murmured Clell, "she'll jump overboard. Oh, you don't know her. She can swim from here to John-the-Fool! Only the sharks—"

"She'll never get a chance," retorted Mary. "Never, Mr. Clell-the-Fool! That is a wonderful way to win a woman—simply steal her as Virgil did."

"Mary," gasped Clell, "why didn't you tell *me*—long ago?"

She shrugged evasively. "Oh, well! But now I

see plainly that you and Doctor Dick are perfect old maids. I had to come down here in my barbaric Broadway fashion and start something."

"Well, I really," he went on, "would like to know what you came here for! Virgil's er—romance?"

"He never had a chance to talk to her in six years—she always ran away, he says." Mary thrust out her firm chin at him. "And you, of course, with your conceit—and Doctor Dick, with his egregious cynicism, couldn't suspect how things were!"

"I suspect," I put in, "exactly how things *are!*"

And Mary understood me well enough; but Clell—never. We watched Deputy Daggetts hug his shotgun and shiver in the morning damp. A film of dawn hung above the banked clouds eastward. The rippling fringe of the squall over the gulf had just stirred our tidal lake and passed westward. A star hung over the damp limp sail of the *Good Child* as she trailed at the hundred feet of tow line. Virgil held her tiller on the course. Now and then our black steersman looked back grinning; he had some secret orders from the boss, but what they were I knew not.

"For an adventure," I murmured, "it has been intolerably quiet. And breakfast—will Virgil bring the lady to breakfast? I mind me once at the bar-

on's—" but they would not let me relate again of the little duck.

In the gaining dawn I began to see my companions' faces—Mary's with her clear pallor and gray eyes a trifle tired from the vigil; Clell with his rugged look of hardiness and outworld freedom. Plainly there was no surrender, and the strength was his. He might easily have forgotten that she ever cared for him as far as I could read. And she had suffered in her wilderness up there, the wilderness of the city; while he had found new freedom in his. Again I caught that speechless surprise in Mary, the mingled hurt pride and admiring envy that he had so changed. Never had she dreamed of having to fight for his regard, his loyalty, his love. That any new world could come to suffice; a new ardor from which she must win him back. She was not used to making love; he had done all that in the old days. I saw her confused dilemma so cleverly concealed. She did not know how to begin with him. I was enjoying it all hugely; it seemed an excellent revenge on Mary to have her discover she was not altogether indispensable to any of us. She had stepped out of her exquisite and ordered world of tribute and success to where the footing was not so sure.

And while all this was idling through my mind as the pink day shouldered up against half the sky, I heard an exclamation from somewhere. It seemed to come out of the air, to be distant, and yet so absolutely insistent with shock and numbing surprise that it arrested my mind above all the throb of our engine. I looked back instinctively to that boat we were towing, it could come from nowhere else.

Virgil had left his wheel and was amidships on the lugger staring down in the low cabin. His attitude was that of a man who had suddenly seen a pit yawn before him. He was utterly speechless now. Then I, too, found my question palled on my lips. We all were staring without word.

Up and out of that stuffy cabin on the other boat an apparition was rising, and it was not the kidnaped mistress of Isle Bonne.

The Baron de Vedrinnes, his rooster cap awry over his red-gray shock of hair, and in his vast redder robe, was yawning and looking about that fair morning with the air of a man who admires but who had not yet got the sleep rubbed out of his eyes.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### IN THE FACE OF FAILURE

WE were quite too stupefied for comment. Virgil, standing within six feet of that apparition, was the first to recover. He made a downward motion of his hand to the helmsman and the power was shut from the *Seabird's* propeller. The tow-line slid to the water, and the heavier *Good Child* floated alongside. The Texan had sat down on the hatch cover and was regarding his prize.

The Baron John Bernal de Vedrinnes, one time of Austria and the Louisiana Lottery Company, seemed heaving a sigh of satisfaction and even comprehension. He set his green cap back on his left ear, and then I saw he had a fearful wound across his pink head. It was bound up with a bit of lacy stuff but this had fallen quite away. And now his eyes went to the deck near Virgil's feet, he advanced and picked up something, cocking his head sidewise sorrily and yet with a great and sagacious pride.

"Ah, my good Doctor!" he roared now. "You should have seen it all. One fellow clipped across

the temple and another stuck like a pig through the neck! Me—I—it could not have been better in my days of the cuirassiers!"

He was flourishing at us the fragments of his wondrous sword. I saw then the spattered blood of the deck, the coaming, and the littered ropes, for the day was here. He gathered the bits of steel in his hand and waved them again. "And now, my friends, have you breakfast anywhere about? I could sit at it with appreciation. As you surprise me with these attentions, I may expect your hospitality, may I not?"

"The su'prise," murmured Virgil, "is mutual."

"Doubtless." He came near our rail and then perceived Mary. Blinking his old fox eyes, he gathered his vast robe and bowed and then stood erect like a gorgeous, rotund totem pole in the sunrise. "I am honored—I am stolen, abducted—made away with by force—what an adventure to conclude with! I can relate further for my lady. I am forever turning up in situations which cause me to suspect that fortune, my good-grand-dame, is still winking her eye at the world and chuckling: 'Ah, John Bernal! In he goes by the heels—deep in the jam pot. Up he comes and scraping the sweetest of the sweets on a bright penny—that is like him.' "

"What, may I ask," I put in on his braggadocio, "has happened?"

"Everything—everything!"

"Where," muttered Virgil, "is Laure—we came fo' her."

"Yes?" The baron looked at him cornerwise out of an eye. "Your scoundrelly courts have decided against her—she has lost, and there is another disappointment for my marquise. But no matter—she still has me—Baron John—who always turns up at the crux of things."

"Where is she?" the boss retorted curtly.

The baron tapped his bandages. "If you had but waited an hour, you might have seen her. Her tender heart could not abide my scratches. She must be taken ashore with Allesjandro to find some doctor's stuff and bandages. Bah—me!" He slapped his wound. "What is that to me?"

"You were going away to-day—with her?"

"We awaited a wind, my friend. We were off to dumfound the world. The good God would see to that." He had come cockily aboard us, puffing like a porpoise, and bowed again to Mary. 'I heard of your arrival, mademoiselle—it is strange how news travels through our swamps—but it does. Not a move can one make—that, I perceive, is why you are

here." And he grinned, closing one shifty eye. "I am honored, mademoiselle."

"I was most happily received at your island," Mary answered. "And I have heard the most excellent things about you."

"I should imagine. The good doctor here," and he chuckled me in the ribs with his fat elbow, "trust it to him. My little marquise, she can tell you! Eh, the good doctor, he is not so slow. In her exquisite and happy patois she can relate"—he broke off and shook his head at me—"ah, but I will be discreet!"

I wanted to punch him; they all looked at me with new suspicion. If anything went wrong with the lamentable affairs of Clell or Mary or Virgil Williams, they seemed to imagine I was at the bottom of it. It is always the misfortune of the man who keeps his mouth shut and refuses maudlin advice to confidences.

Williams had come over now and sat down deliberately across from the Baron John. I saw at once he was going to have it out with him; I was about to suggest something concerning laying the cloth for breakfast here instead of in the stuffy little cabin, when Virgil began, after his long measuring of his enemy.

"I want to know," he said, "just what you did with her?"

"I could answer better, my friend," retorted the baron, "were I back at Isle Bonne instead of out here in mid-lake."

"Is she there?"

"As you have stolen the only means she had of getting away she undoubtedly is."

The Texan motioned again to his engine-man. "Put her about, Octave—run for the *cheniere*. Only," he looked at the baron, hardening his eyes, "I have a notion to maroon you on this shell reef. Just one thing prevents me—and that is to know what part you are playing in *her* affairs. And what you have in that lugger. The's a box of plunder—and you were making away with it."

"I? That was the last I thought of! You have done the making away, messieur. My little marquise—we were to leave only at our pleasure—with dignity—and without waiting for your eviction. Ah, this last night, she was weeping as she went back through the moonlight to her island. I can see her, my friends—standing upright in the skiff as Allesjandro pulled the oars—saying farewell, for she would not return again."

Virgil was looking at the blue wall of cypress over the rags of mist lifting from the lake. Far beyond Isle Bonne a tremor of smoke went to the sky and spread slowly. There his machine was grinding on at the man's size job, and he was here listening to all this chatter from the fustian knight.

"She would never have left," returned Virgil slowly, "if it hadn't been fo' you. We'd have compromised this case five years ago, if it hadn't been fo' all the foolishness you put in her head. You kept her in a dream, and neve' could she see us right."

"I have made her little world bright with fancies. I have made her feel and see—yes, dream—if you will—what would have been forever beyond her. Ah, what she is, I made of her! I am the fool, then—am I? Very well, then, my friend, I am Baron John of the Fool's Island, and I have built a soul while you were digging a ditch."

The boss sighed patiently. "Well, no mo'. I ex-paict the's other knights than you in the world. I reckon the's other fighters. And that stuff in the—the plunder from the deep swamp—whatever it is, it is not yours. It was hers by all rights, if you are tellin' truth of it. But now it's ours by a better

right. You understand it's part of Isle Bonne, my friend?"

The old knight shrugged. "You are entirely welcome. In the hold of my man's boat is a ship's chest—exactly as we found it." He slipped a lump of sugar into his coffee and stirred it, tasted with relish. "Entirely yours, my friend—I have no more use for it than the carcass of a man from which the soul is vanished."

I could not make him out. That gross bundle of a man with the face of a Caesar. In a fashion he seemed stunned, and airily concealing it. I attributed this to his sore wounds which he would make light of.

"Your coffee, mademoiselle," he murmured to Mary, "is excellent. My man, Allesjandro, can surpass it but a trifle, but that trifle—pardon me—be it coffee, or a woman, or a fight, or an effulgence of the soul—that trifle, my friends—by which one thing surpasses another—is the only thing worth living for. I know—I have followed trifles a lifetime."

I feared he was in mood for one of his hour-long preachments such as I had listened to of nights in his forest lodge, but now he sat back pensive-

ly and watched the *Seabird* slipping into the cove before Papa Prosper's. There was no sign of life, the gray square house on stilts was so quiet that one could hear the droning bees behind it in the wild sweet wet garden. The men made fast and we got out. Then I saw old Prosper's thin figure on his gallerie. He held his inevitable newspaper and was wiping his great spectacles, and then made a gesture of welcome.

"She sleeps—*mon chère*," he said gently. "It is lak one's heart breaks. One great thing she dream, messieurs—but no mo'."

The others were going along the tiny wharf toward him when the baron touched my sleeve. "A moment—Doctor, you and our friend. As he speaks of treasure, and his new-made titles, let him have the thing."

We followed him aboard the *Good Child* and into the low-roofed space. The baron pulled aside a piece of sail-cloth, and there was a rude chest of thick strips of wood banded with rusty iron—perhaps four feet long by two wide. A mere, rough old ship's chest which had a lead lining that had now been rent asunder by axes and had here and there, a spatter of blood where the renegade and disappointed blacks had fought the baron over it.

The old man pointed to the lid of wood and sheet lead.

"Throw it back," our host said: "You see I have the key—it has been in my possession for fifty-four years, but of course it was quite useless last night—even had I been permitted to use it."

We looked at him in some astonishment. His airy pretense was quite gone; he was smiling with a brave sadness.

Then Virgil, bending, threw back the heavy and rotted slab of the treasure box; the ragged seal of inner lead came with it. We looked, inhaling the dry dead odor of musty cloth and wormy wood and corroded metal. Within that narrow leaded space was an opened case elegantly inlaid with pearl, within which was a pair of dueling pistols, beautiful weapons of a period of the '30s, along with their loader and percussion box. And a tarnished candlestick, a dull brass ship's compass, a mass of rotted woven stuff, and a pair of molded boots, high and fine of leather and ornamentation. Not a thing of value beyond the curio store; merely the stuff you may see any day in the antique shops of Royal Street in New Orleans; which has come down from the times of the *grandissimes* of French Louisiana.

“There is nothing here of note,” I muttered.

“Exactly.” The Baron John raised his sore arm to his bruised head. “And what there is, I put there.”

“You!”

“I, messieur. It was in 1853. I was second in command on the *Petrel*. It was Armand Drouillot and I who ran her into John-the-Fool cove on a high tide to escape the English sloop-of-war who were lying out of Caminda Pass for the slave-traders. Do you remember the October of that year?—the hurricane that all but destroyed the aristocracy of French Louisiana gathered at its watering place on Last Island? Well, we got the fringe of it here to eastward—enough it was for the *Black Petrel*—she went hard into the reef at the edge of Isle Bonne woods and the marsh channel filled behind her. Armand, the old hawk, and myself took to the trees and made our way to his brother Pierre’s house where now the ancient chimneys stand in the prairie. The crew were drowned or scattered, the survivors doubtless hanged the world over later, for few there were who did not deserve it. But Armand and I came back when Pierre’s house went in the sea that rose over the isle—Pierre, the old burgher, had escaped, and I recall the glee with

which Armand plundered his strong box and carried off the records." The old man paused and watched us cunningly: "Can you guess now what I have hunted for these four years—the fortune of my little marquise?"

I shook my head; Virgil merely continued his watching. The baron rolled back his red sleeve to gesture more eloquently: "Last night, after we had hoisted the *Black Petrel's* chest out of the sunken and shell-filled cabin, I opened it in this lugger's hold. The renegade blacks stood by—they had suspected me always of some trick. I knew there was no gold in the ship chest—and that they had assisted me all the year in that expectation. So, I was not unprepared for what happened. We opened it—but then I found that, even at the last, Armand had played the fox—the documents which he had secreted in the ship's box when we still had hope of escaping on her, were not there. Nothing—not a dollar, a franc, a sou—either! But it was the warrants from Charles the Third of Spain, issued to Gaspard Boulligny de Drouillot, the adventurer from Bordeaux, who aided the fourth Spanish governor of Louisiana—Don Bernardo de Galvez—in the capture of Mobile in 1780, that I sought—and in vain. Yet I swear I saw Armand put the same

grants—which were for ten leagues of land on this south coast—into this chest. I made a hurried search last night—and then the black hounds were on me. Allesjandro was in the swamp bringing the last of the loot on board, so I fought the three alone—I had promised them gold—alas! There was none.”

“And you knew all the time there was none?”

“Undoubtedly. I played upon them—their superstitions, their terror of the Drouillot name, their avarice—their fear of the law. I had no trouble with them at first, but of late—well, it was all I could do to keep my marquise from appealing to the Yankees to control the blacks. And when they thought you were returning with men who would hunt them out of the swamp, they hurried the work with the dynamite. Then the end came—there was no gold in Armand’s cabin, and I knew it.”

“Then they turned upon you!”

The old swordsman nodded; his fat arm came up triumphantly. “It could not have been better. There, in the swamp, by the moonlight, with my lady looking on in terror yet admiringly. On the deck of this boat, gentlemen. The instant the blacks knew I had put it over them, they rushed me. I clipped Crump across the face, drawing the blade so—and

he went back in the deep black water. The other fellow took my thrust through the neck, and with a howl he followed. But the third—as he went down, pinned as neatly as ever I gave a man the point, he fouled me over head with a leaded rope. That was all. He fell across my sword, and broke it to bits. After that we hurried out to open water, Allesjandro with his pole and I at the wheel, quite dizzy, but equal to it."

"You fought the three niggers—you!" Virgil's voice was gentle.

"Nothing, my friend. They had no chance—I had a bag of tricks with the sword, and they knew it. It is the colored man's fatal weakness—he never can guess what the white man's last coup may be."

"You—you are some—man!" Virgil's hand was out to him, and the old adventurer took it.

"Well, I have played and lost. There is no more now, my friends—I have sucked the orange of life quite dry. But ah, it was exquisite—my old blood has stirred this night!"

We followed him slowly out. Somehow the Baron John had us stilled. For his lady's fortune, in her defense, he had played his absurdity, but unsullied. He had gone bragging through the world

and played its game, buffeting its follies with follies, and its crimes with crimes, but, perhaps, he had kept that bright old blade clean—at least for her.

In the hatchway I found I had taken his hand. He looked down, queerly bright of eye from the blinding sunshine.

“Eh, my good friend! I would like to sit again with you in John-the-Fool and growl over our coffee in the summer heat; I would like to watch the long shades fall from the deep swamp out across the black clear water while you and I moiled over the affairs of a world or two and thought nothing of it! You have been much to me—but it is ended now. The play is out, the pit is dug, the sword is broken. Isle Bonne is yours and the game is lost.”

Papa Prosper had ambled down the crazy plank wharf, greeting Clell and Mary with unruffled courtesies. Then to us he came, and like two ghosts out of the past he and the baron stiffly acknowledged each other.

Papa brushed a mosquito from his ear with his month-old newspaper. “Ah, messieurs, dat coffee I mak. Yo’ will stop? Isle Bonne, she will entertain yo’ wan leetle time again. Dis leetle white boat, in dis shade, she stay. Mademoiselle Laure,



The thing seemed to fascinate him



mebbe fo' breakfast she wake up. All night she weep and wondeh?"

The baron was waving the good Prosper on with his chatter.

"Ah, may she sleep! Two years now I have held the vision to her—I have made her eyes brighten and her laughter come. Victory—fortune—defeat, dismay to her enemies—that was what I held forth to her, and now—even last night, when she knew we had lost—she loved me."

He waddled on after the others, in out of that blinding sun of the mid-morning, for the Gulf breeze had failed us now. We all were subdued enough; I think it was that gentle-eyed Prosper in his bare feet, waving us courteously to seats in his grateful shade that made such a thing as belligerency toward the islanders impossible. And as for me—well, I could not help thinking of Baron John Bernal de Vedrinnes, and his blade lying there all broken, soiled by the dirty hold of Allesjandro's lugger.

The old knight's roaring was done. He sat below us all on the steps to Prosper's gallerie, his pink medallion profile turned and a trifle bowed, yet his eyes looking from under their shaggy red

brows as if, out of the island's shadows, old fancies might troop to hail him. So still it was that the droning of the bees came from the swamp garden back of the house, the patter of Prosper's feet was distinct as he fetched his coffee and sugar; and afar over the wooded isle, we could hear the faint whisper of the surf on the outer reefs.

Mary was deadly tired from the night's adventure and the day's hurricane heat; Clell moodily sitting below her; and the baron and I were busied with our thoughts.

We were so when Virgil at last came out of the lugger's cabin hold where I had left him gazing quietly into that ship's chest with its foolish rubbish. He looked up, and then quietly called to me.

"Just you, Doctor Dick," he said, and went below again.

I went down the wharf and aboard the *Good Child* to where the Texan sat once more on the broken inner casing of Armand Drouillot's cabin chest from the wrecked slave ship. The thing seemed to fascinate him.

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE KING O' SPAIN SURRENDERS

“**W**ELL?” I said after watching him study the lead box.

“Well,” he answered, “do you think we ought to win?”

“Win?” I retorted. “We have won. Even this ridiculous matter of the old ship and the digging, and the interference with your work and scaring of the negroes with the old pirate yarns so that they desert you—it’s all done now. The baron admits it—the rummy old chap. He knows how to fight as well as lose. I think Laure does too—she’ll not have any great flare-up now—though she may go away with a breaking heart, when it comes to leaving Isle Bonne. She’s game enough to lose right.”

“That’s just it. The greatest fighters are the greatest losers—that’s me, Doctor Dick. And also—you. And the rest of us.”

“What do you mean?” I answered sharply, for the heat in there was stupefying.

For answer he reached in his khaki pocket and took out a coarse bundle. There were papers with a skin covering apparently, and tied with fine leather thongs, and the whole thing had been roughly opened and then put together hastily as if in a sort of panic on the part of the finder.

"Just this." He shook out the long rude mass before me. I made nothing of it, except a faded seal stamped on it twice. The writing was quite unknown to me.

"I can read Spanish—" Virgil went on evenly, "learned it in Cannanea where I ran a mine fo' seven years fo' a Mexican company. This is a whole lot different—but I know. Listen: the date of this is 1777—and the seal is of the fourth Spanish viceroy of Louisiana. Look here: "*Don Bernardo de Gálvez, Pensonado de los Realy distinguada orden de Carlos III, Gobernador y Capitan General de las Provincias de Luisiana y Florida Occidental*—" The Texan broke off solemnly: "Doctor Dick, what's the use? It goes on to name the grant given to Gaspard Drouillot by grace of the king of Spain—and it is the land we're standin' on!"

And after a moment he murmured: "That little old king—I neve' had no manneh of use fo' him—I told you long ago!"

It was enough. I stared at him but spoke quietly.  
“How did you get it?”

“Kicked this pistol box to pieces. I just had a curiosity. The old chap was too played out after his fight last night to notice much, and this mornin’ he was too sorrowful. He just quit a minute too soon, but I expaict his old eyes couldn’t see what I saw, anyway. All the time he talked I watched that old shiny gun-box. I wouldn’t give a cent for a barrel of ‘em as guns; but I noticed. There were two compartments in that case—one under this velvet bottom. I saw it was so when I lifted the guns. And it was locked, but soon as you and the old boy went out, I broke it. There, rolled up, as though they’d been slapped in there in a mighty hurry were these papers—Laure’s grants—right from the king o’ Spain. I sure read enough fo’ that! Why the looks of it’s enough to scare me!”

“Yes?” I queried, for I had not thought as fast as he.

“I waited till you all got out,” he continued.

“Yes,” I repeated, “not a soul of them knows—not a soul in all the world, except you and me, Virgil.”

His troubled smile was on me. “I could burn ‘em here on the cabin flo’. I could tear ‘em across and drop ‘em ove’ and in an hour they’d look like

a drowned water-lily. Sho'! And if *she* has 'em there's no two guesses at it. The Prairie Meadows Company—and you and me, and every one in it—is busted. There's be no fight in it—we couldn't go back on these grants—you see I know. The cou't 'd reverse the case in fo'ty minutes when they saw these first records."

"I see." The slow and growing brightness of his eye did not deceive me. And I went on evenly in what must have been a taunt to him, there with his wreck—fortune, his pledged word, his reputation among men,—the fruit of his eight years' fight for himself and all the others: "The biggest fighters are the biggest losers—you have it right, Virgil."

"What would you do, Doctor Dick?"

"I'm not saying. I won't be wholly ruined if the land company blew up to-morrow. Not altogether. But there are at least twenty widows and poor folks who, one way and another, have been led to invest in the Isle Bonne lands through me. Old friends and neighbors, that I got in—somehow, because you said—"

"Don't—" he said. "I got as many mo'! I ain't worryin' about those New York fel-los. The speculators and financiers; it's the little ones who—who—well, they been pretty patient with me—let

me vote their stock so's I could fight the big fellas who wanted to pull out all the time. Yes, seh—they stood by me—trustin'—and now—”

He looked out at the blue quiver of heat against the cypress isle—the timber alone of it would fight off disaster if all else quit him.

“Well,” he muttered briefly. “I wondeh why God made me find it? It wouldn’t have been so hard on you—Doctor Dick—or Clell—or anybody. But me —” he looked out and up the dazzling wharf to the high silent house: “And she—she’s asleep in the’ —and knows she’s lost—yes, seh—and *me*—I’m walkin’ around with this stuff in my pockets. Yes, seh—and she won’t compromise—she’ll go away a beggar with that old fool. Yes—seh! I deviled him fo’ fou’ years—but now he’s a betteh man than I am! It’s how a man loses that counts! ‘Anybody can be a man and *win!*’”

Then he stood up and put the papers in his pocket. I followed him out and under the awnings of his own boat—the gay little white cruiser with her brasses and mahogany cabin that he had bought in his first exultance of victory to have for journeys “out front” to the city in the busy years of the exploitation and selling of his lands. I think, when we had gone down in that cozy cabin, and the first

stir of the afternoon breeze which foretells the August squalls had touched the silken curtains, that it was the ironic luxuriousness of the *Seabird* after the dirt and grime of his work boats all these years, which first drove the steel of failure to his soul.

He laughed mirthlessly as we sat across the table and touched the ice-water to our lips. The yellow boy was under the fore-awnings rubbing lazily at the brass-work. And the gaunt Texan looked out to the others on the shade of the gallerie.

"The big losers, Doctor Dick! Shucks, the old boy is right! To-morrow, I'll stand on my feet, on the corneh of Canal and Royal Streets—and I'll owe the Prairie Meadows Land Company two hundred and twenty-five thousand dollehs—and I won't have the price of a shave, when I pay the boy here."

I had to watch him now—and I had kept my face averted. He was laughing again strangely, like a man the heat had touched. Then he got up and struck the table.

"Doctor Dick, will you go send her down here? I cain't go face 'em all. I wouldn't know how to talk. And the baron—the old boy—I cain't face him, somehow. But Laure—the grants are hers—I ex-paict I must pay 'em right into her hands. And tell her we quit—to-morry I'll jerk the dredges out

of the ditch, wire the New York fel-los to get a new manager to pull what he can out of the wreck—and then I'll find a steameh fo' British Honduras. I know a fel-lo minin' down the'. You just watch me some-a-time!" Then the patient smile lit his worn eyes: "I can fight—but I know when to be licked. The baron—I expaict he's been just livin' on fo'ty years after his proper time to tell me that. And a dog-gone proper knight he is!"

"Tut—you!" I stuttered at him, for the tears kept to my eyes. "I'm telling you the same—you beggar! It's her island—how the mischief could we keep it?"

"Easy. Just a match to these documents." And again his sad humor lit him. "Easy—and that's what makes it so plumb *hard!*"

And when I went out and up the hot wharf to Papa Prosper's house, I could still hear him muttering in his little white cabin:

"Easy—and that's what makes it *hard!*"

I found them all idling about in Prosper's chairs and hammocks. It was mid-noon now, August in Louisiana, without the Gulf breeze; and that is something bad—when the sea breeze fails.

The tidal lakes northward were blue burnished copper again, with a little patch of feathery bloom

miles away where our incipient wind had wandered. And out of Isle Bonne's jungle, the stinging sun found way.

Mary hardly stirred her weary head from the hammock. "I wonder what is next?" she murmured: "Clell, won't you fan me again—please?"

He had been, it seemed, even after Laure had come out of her darkened chamber. She had refused a chair, and now sat in a small crumpled heap just in the shade of the door. All eyes, she was, and high cheek-bones, with a feverish color; and one hand was reached down to the baron's shoulder, and the old man was patting that and talking to her in the Creole patois of the south coast. She was listening stonily as if, in him, too, her faith was breaking. As if indeed, he was no more the roaring knight-errant whose words could people a world of fancy, but a crushed old man, tired and depending on her for solace.

When I spoke quietly to her she looked up but without interest. The baron, on the step below, moved a bit as if to acknowledge my presence. Clell and Mary regarded me with the tired repose of the hot noon; it had been a bad night for us all, and now, besides that, there seemed a great sorrow brooding over all this brightness and this shade—

the glitter of lake and sky, the depth and mystery of the flooded forest curving about Isle Bonne's cove. Silence, and every one too weary and haunted by an unspoken regret, to break it.

"When is he going?" Clell muttered to me.

"I don't know. I don't know anything. Let him be—he's got enough just now."

And though they knew nothing of his struggle at the last, Clell and Mary nodded; it was the boss again who would have to determine the way; shoulder the load over the peak of the hill for us all. I turned again to the mistress of the lost isle.

"Laure, will you come down to the little white boat?"

She shrugged indifferently: "I have seen it, m'sieu—the treasure. Ah, that was a bitter joke—my old kind friend is heart-broken with it all, and I can not find a word to comfort him."

Her ragged old knight was patting the slim hand he held:

"There—there—my dear! I have taken too many hard knocks of fortune to mind this. It was you, little Marquise—of you always I have thought. Out in the great world with a fortune—how this would have pleased you, or that; the Rue de la Paix, or the boulevards on a day of autumn all color and

brightness and motion; or perhaps some little hat out of a shop of wonders that would have made your eyes laugh—or in Italy, where the blue sea is and the high peaks rise,—you who have never seen a hill would have felt your soul dumb before them! Eh—little Marquise! The glory of the world—that is what I would have spread like a silken gown before you, just to have heard your little cries of wonder.”

She bent to kiss his old cheek gravely: “No man can speak like you, dear Baron—only poets! Never mind—there may be wonders still.”

So she came down the creaky old steps and off on the wharf in a small defiant gaiety; but I, by her side, saw she would not look back for her tears.

“Yes—yes”—she whispered to me—“*you* know, but my baron—*he* must not know! He must think I am happy and do not care!”

So, without answer, I brought her into the cabin where Virgil sat by the mahogany table. The sun fell through and upon some silver things there, and the purple hyacinth spikes which Mary had idly picked up as they trailed along our course through the lake.

She looked at Virgil silently, and then sat across from him with an air of indifferent expectancy. She

had lost to her enemy, and there was probably some form or rote of the law to comply with, so that Isle Bonne was his forever. And she would sign or give, or whatever it was—she had got through fighting now, when Monsieur le Baron with his sore heart, said it was useless.

I stood in the doorway to the engine-room irresolutely. Virgil wanted me, I knew, but I did not care to watch it all. But he did not give me a chance to excuse myself and get away gracefully. It was with his usual blunt sureness that he spoke, waving his hand briefly to the ancient documents upon the table.

"Laure, there they are—I give 'em back to you."

Without understanding, she reached to the papers and drew them toward her, about to read. Then, with her elbows on the table, her hands to her cheeks, her dark hair tumbling about her brow, her long lashed eyes lowered, she was intent on the opening paragraphs of that sonorous and high-sounding pronunciamento of the king of Spain.

After a moment she looked up gravely; her bright eyes on the Texan's calm face.

"What is this all, m'sieu? The French on the margin, I know well enough, though it is queer. But the Spanish—I do not know much of that.

Only—here is my name”—and she lifted the papers from their leather backing and shook them decisively: “Bouligny de Drouillot—he was the *first* of us.”

Virgil reached a finger to touch the paper at the bottom. “That is his signature—his bond to perform certain things—and in return they gave him —this!” His arm went in a sweep out to the forest isle. “From the riveh to the sea—and four hundred arpents wide—that’s what it was to begin with, Laure—the land you had!”

She watched him silently. Her fingers relaxed from the paper.

“The king o’ Spain didn’t do things in a small way, Laure. And I—I—cain’t either, some-a-way! That little old king—been dead a hundred and fifty years—sho’—I wish he could know how I gambled against him—and lost!”

“M’sieu—” Her breath was rising quicker. “You mean—this—”

He watched her slim fingers clutch the paper nervously. “Yes—just that. The grants that the king o’ Spain gave to yo’ people, Laure. The papehs that the Supreme Cou’t gave you three years to find—and you couldn’t—and so *you* lost!”

“What are you doing with them here?”

"I found them here—this mawnin'. That old gun-case. The baron was too dazed afteh his fight to find anythin'. I found them."

"And you give them back to me?"

He was silent, his lean brown face impassive in the flicker of sun through the screened windows.

"Why do you give them back to me?"

He could not answer that either to her growing persistence. She laid the ancient grants of her marauding fathers down and looked at him. "I don't believe I would if I had been you," she murmured: "I know it means you are just smashed forever—and I don't believe I could have done it, if I had been you."

"Yes, you could. The baron would—dog-gone him!"

"Yes, but they call him: John-the-Fool!"

"Sho'! And he taught me in the end, I reckon. He cain't be any bigger one than me—when it comes to playin' the game *square*. Why, the old boy—I neve' knew him befo'!" Virgil laughed briefly: "Why, yesterday I wouldn't a give fou' bits fo' all the old knights in history—no manneh of use fo' 'em! Then along comes this old boy, and I find he's played straight fo' you all the time. Fo' you—and he cain't get ahead of me at that!"

She was silent again, looking at him now and then, with odd and puzzled brightness, as if unable to follow all he meant. Then she reached her hand to the yellow grants.

"So they're mine. Isle Bonne—and all the prairie. Just like they were, always."

"Yes." He was pushing back from the table, and now looked at me with his shyly serene smile. "And I reckon I feel betteh now. Cleaned out, but I feel betteh. I'll be on my feet and fightin' in a month, Doctor Dick!"

"Yes, but—" she had taken a step between him and me, still holding the documents. "All you've done—the canals, and the pumping station—every-thing?"

"I'm sorry," he muttered. "I cain't put yo' woods and prairie back like it was. But in a year—two years—the Isle Bonne jungles will grow ove' the plant, and the lilies—you won't find a ditch fo' yo' lilies, Laure."

"It wasn't always so," Laure answered slowly. "Do you know that once they kept the sea out, and it was all sugar cane and rice from the woods to Bayou L'Ourse? And groves and orange trees—Papa Prosper can almost remember—there were little children playing there!"

He was looking out to her blue-green woods, and the old somber sense of failure came on him: "I know. That's what I used to think—I'd fight the sea back, too. You' swamp land—such black rich land—I was goin' to beat you—and then sometime show you—what I dreamed of in the beginnin'—the little farms and orange rows and homes they'd be—yes, seh! And children, too—I could 'a' made that fo' 'em—hundreds of 'em—thousands of 'em —long afteh I'd been dead. That was what I dreamed of—it wasn't the money—any fool can make money. But the game—that was it. To make the earth richer, and some homes happier—afteh you'd gone and you' game with you—that's the man's size job I dreamed of!"

She had listened to his exaltation curiously. "Was that it, m'sieu? It is beautiful. Messieur le Baron —why even my old knight, he could not talk like that!"

"It wasn't his game—it was my kind of game." He looked down at her patiently: "And you little thing—I used to pity you—you wouldn't listen to reason or compromise—you'd neve' listen to *me* at all. Sho'—it made me laugh—it hurt me so!"

He was laughing strangely as he came aft to the engine-room. I went ahead to make way for him

and was out on the stern deck under the awnings when I heard her cry to him.

“Wait! You mustn’t—if it hurts you so!”

He had turned in the passageway, his brown crushed hat shading his face from me. “I cain’t talk to you, now—afteh you beat me.”

“Why don’t you say you want me to help you?”

“All the time, I reckoned I’d tell you mo’—when I’d won. Now, you’d think—because I was beat—I come to you and beg fo’ compromise—to fix it up, someway. Well, I cain’t—from you.”

He was turning from her, his voice at the nearest break I had ever known in the man, when she came and was at his side.

“Here—here—” I heard her whisper: “I’d rather you would burn them—than to hurt you so! To have you feel that way—to beg of me—of *me*—when all the time—all the time, I waited—wondered—”

I could not understand her clear voice further for its blurring curiously. “To beg of me—” she went on. “*Me!* When all the time I wasn’t trying to hate you.” Then her voice was lost altogether, and I thought it was muffled against his gray shirt; for after a moment, I heard him whisper: “You mean

that—you little—? Why, all the time you was tryin' *not* to love me—and couldn't make it—go?"

I heard the ancient grants from the king of Spain fall to the cabin floor—from about the height of the Texan's shoulder. Then, as I reached the planks of Papa Prosper's wharf, purposely making a noise so that they would know I was hastening away, I heard Laure speaking so softly that I did not know whether it was a whisper, laughter or a sob.

"Messieur le Baron! We will have to go tell him that Isle Bonne has found another knight besides John-the-Fool! A real knight for the little homes and gardens—and all the children playing!"

"A fool fo' luck," he murmured—"that's me, little Marquise!"

I went on up the gallerie stairs and heard Papa Prosper within puttering about his charcoal pot. Then a siren whistle afar on the lakes, Virgil's second supply steamer coming to the main canal. Then steps behind me; and I discovered that the two from the white boat were following.

"Well," I said: "since you are here, you may as well tell them."

Laure looked at her fat knight who was sound asleep in the shadow, his green cap with the rooster

feather fallen quite off his pink-gray head. She was going to him when she found Mary in the hammock and Clell on a low seat by her, holding her hand in much the fashion they did before me in the old days.

"Ah, I always thought, m'sieu, that somewhere nawth—there was a lady!"

"And she had to come down to your wilderness, my dear," Mary murmured, "just to escape from her own—that she made for herself! She knows now!"

Laure had reached the baron. She softly dropped the grants from the king of Spain down upon his hairy bosom, and even in his sleep the knight's fat old hand closed upon them. Clell had arisen to stare at them and at her—and then at Virgil. There was no mistaking anything, even without the Texan's words and the joy in his eyes.

"You win—Virgil?" Clell muttered: "Well, here, old chap! I made good, didn't I? And the big thing is that Mary knows!"

I turned from the boss and his lieutenant gripping each other's hard brown hands. Laure was laughing with her fingers upon the sleeves of both.

"Messieurs! When Messieur le Baron awaken,

I shall tell him I have got the last one—they have all come to our side!—to assist John-the-Fool!"

The fat knight, catching a phrase, murmured in his sleep again. I listened:

"Ah, Marquise—you should have seen the one I was—when I was *twenty!*"

THE END





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